

# *Women Shaping the South*

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*Creating and Confronting Change*



*Edited by Angela Boswell and Judith N. McArthur*

# *Women* Shaping the South

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*Southern Women*

A series of books developed from the Southern  
Conference on Women's History sponsored by  
the Southern Association for Women Historians.

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*University of Missouri Press Columbia and London*

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University of Missouri Press, Columbia, Missouri 65201  
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5 4 3 2 1 10 09 08 07 06

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Southern Conference on Women's History (6th : 2003 : Athens, Ga.)

Women shaping the south : creating and confronting change /  
edited by Angela Boswell and Judith N. McArthur.

p. cm. — (Southern women)

Summary: "Expanded from papers presented at the Sixth Southern  
Conference on Women's History, this collection demonstrates how  
women of different races and classes transformed the South during  
its most crucial turning points, including post-Revolution, Civil  
War, Jim Crow era, World War I, and the civil rights movement"—  
Provided by publisher.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-8262-1617-5 (alk. paper)


ISBN-10: 0-8262-1617-X (alk. paper)

1. Women—Southern States—History—Congresses. 2. Southern  
States—History—Congresses. I. Boswell, Angela, 1965– II. McArthur,  
Judith N. III. Title. IV. Series.

HQ1438.S62S68 2003

305.40975—dc22

2005028189

™ This paper meets the requirements of the  
American National Standard for Permanence of Paper  
for Printed Library Materials, Z39.48, 1984.

Designer: Jennifer Cropp  
Typesetter: Phoenix Type, Inc.  
Printer and binder: The Maple-Vail Book Manufacturing Group  
Typefaces: Berkeley and Bickley

## *Contents*

Editors' Introduction 1

Gentry Women and the Transformation of  
Daily Life in Jeffersonian and Antebellum Virginia

---

*Phillip Hamilton* 7

Jane C. Washington, Family, and  
Nation at Mount Vernon, 1830–1855

---

*Jean B. Lee* 30

“I Desire to Give My Black Family Their Freedom”

Manumissions, Inheritance, and Visions  
of Family in Antebellum Kentucky

---

*Yvonne M. Pitts* 50

Seeking a Moral Economy of War

Confederate Women and Southern  
Nationalism in Civil War North Carolina

---

*Jacqueline Glass Campbell* 74



Redirecting the Tide of White Imperialism  
The Impact of Ida B. Wells's Transatlantic Antilynching  
Campaign on British Conceptions of American Race Relations

---

*Sarah L. Silkey* 97

Unlikely Allies  
Southern Women, Interracial Cooperation, and  
the Making of Segregation in Virginia, 1910–1920

---

*Clayton McClure Brooks* 120

Solving the Girl Problem  
Race, Womanhood, and Leisure in Atlanta during World War I

---

*Sarah Mercer Judson* 152

To See Past the Differences to the Fundamentals  
Racial Coalition within the League of  
Women Voters of St. Louis, 1920–1946

---

*Priscilla A. Dowden-White* 174

Louise Thompson Patterson and the  
Southern Roots of the Popular Front

---

*Claire Nee Nelson* 204

Women's and Girls' Activism in 1960s Southwest Georgia  
Rethinking History and Historiography

---

*Alisa Y. Harrison* 229

About the Editors and Contributors 259

Index 261

# *Women* Shaping the South

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## *Editors' Introduction*

At the Sixth Southern Conference on Women's History in Athens, Georgia, in June 2003, the depth and breadth of the research presented was impressive.<sup>1</sup> As we assembled the very best of the expanded conference papers, representing the cutting edge of scholarship on southern women's history, we were inspired by a story from the front lines rather than the archives, a contemporary drama of African American labor union women creating and confronting change in the Mississippi Delta. Sarah White of Local 1529, United Food and Commercial Workers, mesmerized attendees at the conference's closing plenary session with a firsthand account of the union's 1990 strike against the Delta Pride catfish processing co-op. In the Mississippi Delta, commercial catfish farming has replaced cotton culture, but although the "crop" is different, it is still harvested and processed by black laborers for powerful white landowners. The region's economic transformation has

1. Selected papers from the previous Southern Conferences on Women's History, sponsored by the Southern Association for Women Historians, were published by the University of Missouri Press in the following volumes: 1988 meeting, *Southern Women: Histories and Identities*, ed. Virginia Bernhard, Betty Brandon, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, and Theda Purdue (1992); 1991 meeting, *Hidden Histories of Women in the New South*, ed. Virginia Bernhard, Betty Brandon, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Theda Purdue, and Elizabeth H. Turner (1994); 1994 meeting, *Beyond Image and Convention: Explorations in Southern Women's History*, ed. Janet L. Coryell, Martha H. Swain, Sandra Gioia Treadway, and Elizabeth Hayes Turner (1998); 1997 meeting, *Negotiating Boundaries of Southern Womanhood: Dealing with the Powers That Be*, ed. Janet L. Coryell, Thomas H. Appleton Jr., Anastatia Sims, and Sandra Gioia Treadway (2000); 2000 meeting, *Searching for Their Places: Women in the South across Four Centuries*, ed. Thomas H. Appleton Jr. and Angela Boswell (2003).

changed, without improving, African American women's work lives: assembly-line jobs skinning and gutting catfish under the scrutiny of white supervisors with stopwatches have replaced field labor under white overseers. The tipping point toward the Delta Pride strike was not the bare subsistence wage but management's refusal to allow minimal bathroom breaks and the indignity of having to seek grudging permission from the processing line supervisor to use the restroom. When scab workers proved too slow to skin twelve catfish a minute for eight to ten hours a day, the company was forced to concede to some of the union's demands.

The major events of southern history have often been recounted from the top down, relying upon political and economic models to explain historical changes, and thus the actors have been men who dominated politics, shaped economic development, and led armies. As Sarah White's *Local 1529* demonstrates, however, history is also made from the bottom up by women who confront change and shape it through their actions. The essays in this volume use the tools of social history to examine some of the major transformative events of southern history from the Revolutionary War years to the Civil Rights era. Shifting the focus to the local level, the authors demonstrate how women participated in creating change, even as they often confronted conditions over which they had little power. In addition to exploring southern women's lives, this collection as a whole reflects how women shaped southern history.

Philip Hamilton addresses the long-term impact of the Revolutionary War on Virginia women's roles. The proliferation of political offices following American independence led to an increased number of elite women running plantations and households while their husbands were absent. A drop in the price of tobacco forced agricultural changes that affected women's work routines, and westward migration strained familial ties. Although these Virginia women had not created the changes they confronted, their reactions to the social, economic, and political transformation of Virginia shaped the new society that emerged. Many elite women made the decision to engage in more diversified agriculture, but when they implemented their plans, including rearranging the use of their slave labor forces, they found themselves forced to work harder. Women, who particularly valued family attachments, guided the re-creation of community ties in newly settled areas. While a woman might confront the postrevolutionary changes with resentment or even with a sense of failure, Hamilton shows that they created new lives for themselves and their families.

The postrevolutionary period also created a new country, a republican experiment in which all men were created equal. Women, although grammatically and conceptually precluded from overt political participation as voters or officeholders, nevertheless participated in defining the memory and meaning of the new nation. Jean B. Lee describes how Jane C. Washington worked to preserve Mount Vernon and make it available to the people of a new nation in search of tangible expressions of national pride. When Washington inherited Mount Vernon in 1832, she negotiated the competing claims of providing as well as possible for her children and accommodating the many Americans who wanted access to the hallowed ground of their founding father. Jane Washington “accorded legitimacy to people’s insistence upon access, in ways that her predecessors had not.” She also established what would later become basic protocol for visiting historic homes. While she was unable in her lifetime to guarantee a permanent transfer of the property from private estate to public use, she validated citizens’ insistence upon its public nature. This claim eventually led to the creation of the Mount Vernon Ladies Association that bought the home for its historic value.

One of the most important transformations in southern history was the development of the social, cultural, and legal contours of antebellum slavery. Yvonne M. Pitts offers a unique look at the ways that some women, both slave and free, confronted the proliferating legal strictures of slavery. White women in antebellum Kentucky who used their wills to manumit their slaves challenged social expectations when they placed slaves’ rights to their own personhood above white families’ property rights. That the Kentucky Court of Appeals found no legal grounds on which to overturn such wills, despite the fact that relatives and local courts both found such women to be insane, created important legal precedent. Slave women’s attempts to shape the very real physical and legal strictures of slavery also appear in antebellum Kentucky’s testamentary cases. Confronting a society and an institution that denied them the right to refuse their masters sexual access, some slave women used their positions as coerced mistresses to negotiate manumission. Suits upholding the wishes of masters who freed their mistresses (or perceived mistresses) in their wills were much less successful at the state-court level, but Pitts demonstrates that these slave women’s tenacity did play a role in shaping law.

Historians often view the South’s loss of the Civil War as the defining moment in its history, and many have focused on southern women’s reactions to and participation in the Confederacy’s unsuccessful struggle for independence. Jacqueline Glass Campbell focuses on Sherman’s march through North

Carolina to examine the ways women confronted the changes of the Civil War, particularly the massive destruction caused by the armies. Campbell agrees that women suffered widespread anger and frustration during the war and that their resentment sometimes found expression in criticism of the Confederacy itself; however, Sherman's scorched-earth policy incited outrage that reinforced women's loyalty to the Confederate cause and lasted for years after the end of hostilities. The growth of Confederate nationalism among women, especially near the end of the war, would have long-term consequences, including fostering women's role in the creation of Lost Cause ideology.

The demise of slavery following the Civil War forced southerners to establish new social relationships between the races. Despite a somewhat promising start in race relations, white insistence upon formalized inequalities marked southern history for the rest of the nineteenth century and much of the twentieth. The next six essays examine how black and white southern women confronted racism and created the new society in which they lived side by side.

At the end of the nineteenth century, white southerners brutally reinforced the socially constructed inequalities through a proliferation of extralegal violence and lynching. At literal risk to her life, Ida B. Wells confronted this practice and called attention to its fallacious justification—that white men lynched black men to protect white women from rape. Sarah L. Silkey contributes a new chapter in Wells's story as she demonstrates one of the tactics that Wells used to turn public opinion against the practice of lynching. In 1893 and 1894, Wells traveled to Britain, where by effectively utilizing speaking engagements, elite social connections, and the press, she publicized the viciousness of lynching and the true reasons behind the practice. Her tremendous impact on the British press's analysis of lynching affected American opinion on the subject in both subtle and specific ways.

In the twentieth century another social and increasingly legal means of repressing African Americans was implemented: formal racial separation, or Jim Crow. Clayton McClure Brooks examines how white and black women confronted segregation in Virginia between 1910 and 1920. Black women identified segregation as an unfair system within which they had to work to secure the best social and human services possible for their communities. White women saw in segregation a natural division of the races, albeit one in which inferiors had some claim on their superiors. White and black women in Virginia, despite their vastly different vantage points, created an arena in which they could work together to provide and improve social services for African Americans.

The First World War set in motion many transformations of the South and accelerated other trends. Sarah Mercer Judson examines the increased public activity of women of both races in Atlanta, Georgia, during the war. Confronting changes in the city brought about by the establishment of new army training camps, increased in-migration of African Americans, and new employment opportunities for single women, black and white clubwomen sought to institute changes that would further their social ideals, especially a “politics of respectability.” Judson demonstrates how African American women and white women with similar goals created public spaces that protected the virtue and reputation of both groups. However, because African American women confronted racial politics that reinforced segregation and restricted their political power, they were forced to utilize strategies different from those of white women in order to accomplish their goals.

As women wrapped up their war work, they triumphed in their long struggle for suffrage; the Nineteenth Amendment passed Congress in 1919 and was ratified in time for women to vote in the 1920 election. The National American Woman Suffrage Association transformed itself into the League of Women Voters without resolving the ambivalence over racial cooperation that had marginalized African American women in the suffrage movement. Priscilla A. Dowden-White finds that the St. Louis league confronted the problem of racism in this border city by admitting African American women but organizing them separately. The role of the “colored committee” went beyond voter education; through it, league members of both races worked together on social welfare issues for the city’s African American community, which was expanding rapidly due to emigration from the Lower South. While white and black leaguers could agree on the problems, they did not always see eye to eye on solutions for a segregated city. They stood together on the issue of converting an abandoned white school into a vocational school for black youth but formed opposing camps on the issue of whether a new Negro hospital should be a subunit of the city’s white hospital or an independent facility. However mixed the results on various issues, the league’s colored committee gave African American women political opportunities to create change within their city and to further the needs of their community.

World War I stimulated a migration of African Americans from the rural South to Atlanta, St. Louis, and other southern urban centers and a black exodus from the Deep South to northern cities that eventually altered the course of southern history. Attracted by a wider variety of jobs and the promise of greater personal freedom, many black migrants moved to New York City, where they congregated in Harlem and helped create the explosion of



African American art and literature that was the Harlem Renaissance. Historians have rightly noted that through the Harlem Renaissance many African Americans were introduced to Marxist and Leninist thought, which helped create a philosophy critical of racial oppression; that, in turn, would later assist the civil rights movement in the South. Claire Nee Nelson examines a key figure of the Harlem Renaissance and the “Popular Front” and finds that although Louise Thompson Patterson nurtured her political thought and criticism of racial oppression in the North, the roots of her views were planted firmly in her southern experiences. Confronting the racism in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, and in Hampton, Virginia, had turned Patterson to Marxist ideology, where she discovered the connections between race and class oppression that she voiced in the Popular Front of Harlem and beyond.<sup>2</sup>

While African Americans in the North contributed to an ideology of resistance to racial oppression, brave protesters of all ages in the South actually set in motion and kept alive the civil rights movement. Alisa Y. Harrison examines how women and girls in 1960s southwest Georgia directly confronted racism, violence, oppression, and even imprisonment to create an activist female culture that could sustain them in their movement. Shifting the focus from the movement’s leaders to the thousands of protesters whose participation defined its effectiveness, Harrison demonstrates just how important girls and women were in creating the future of the South.<sup>3</sup>

The southwest Georgia civil rights movement was not immediately successful at ending segregation, and, in fact, Martin Luther King Jr. left Albany in search of a better opportunity to make more dramatic changes more quickly. The girls and women of southwest Georgia, however, continued to work for equal rights there, confronting racism and convincing those who doubted the tenacity of these activists in their demands for equality. Their actions, like those of the other women described in these essays, illustrate that women were not just “also there” in southern history, they were essential to its transformation. And as Sarah White and Local 1529 have forcefully demonstrated, they continue to be.

2. Claire Nee Nelson’s essay is based upon the paper presented at the Sixth Southern Conference on Women’s History in Athens, Georgia, that was coawarded the Jacquelyn Dowd Hall Prize for the best paper presented by a graduate student.

3. Alisa Y. Harrison’s essay is based upon the paper presented at the Sixth Southern Conference on Women’s History in Athens, Georgia, that was coawarded the Jacquelyn Dowd Hall Prize for the best paper presented by a graduate student.

## Gentry Women and the Transformation of Daily Life in Jeffersonian and Antebellum Virginia

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*Phillip Hamilton*

In the spring of 1795, Margaret Davenport Coalter wrote to her lawyer-husband, John, from their home in Staunton, Virginia. The couple wanted to acquire a carriage, and Margaret offered her views on the purchase. John immediately wrote back, not about the item under consideration, but about a wife giving advice to a husband:

Speaking of the Carriage, you say [in your last letter]—“if you presume to advise”—Have you already forgot that it is your duty to consult with and advise your Husband? If *you* have I shall not. It will always be my wish to have your opinions, and I hope often to profit by it. Pray will you look into the Cattelogue of Conjugal virtues drawn up by yourself and see if I am not accurate when I say “it is your duty to advise.”<sup>1</sup>

Coalter's letter would have surprised very few Old Dominion gentry couples, whether they lived in the 1770s, 1790s, or 1840s. Despite living in a patriarchal society, women of the late eighteenth and early to mid-nineteenth centuries were not ornamental creatures who meekly waited to be directed this way or that. Rather Virginia society expected wives to be true partners to their husbands (albeit inferior partners), who contributed to the household

1. John Coalter to Margaret Davenport Coalter, May 3, 1795, Brown-Tucker-Coalter Papers, Swem Library, College of William and Mary.

as well as provided advice and sometimes guidance to their menfolk. While expectations of gentry wives remained constant over the decades, their lives, attitudes, and outlooks changed considerably. Indeed, the manner in which women spent their days and with whom they interacted underwent a significant transformation. In essence, Jeffersonian and antebellum women found themselves dealing with a remarkable series of transformations. The state's agricultural system, for instance, moved rapidly away from its traditional dependence on tobacco toward a mixed, market-oriented economy. Westward migration accelerated in the early nineteenth century, which separated families and oftentimes destroyed once-vital kinship networks. The Revolution, furthermore, had established a new political order that not only required men to serve in a host of newly created public offices, but also demanded that women deal with household and plantation responsibilities alone. As these changes unfolded, women came to view themselves, the world around them, and the afterlife through strikingly new eyes. In short, in the decades after the War for Independence, Virginia women led very different lives and became very different people.

In the late-colonial era, Virginia had a staple agricultural economy that produced mainly tobacco for export to the mother country. Planters used most of the proceeds from their crop sales to purchase British-made goods and wares. Although some Virginians (like George Washington) periodically turned to wheat as a marketable crop, the Old Dominion's landowning gentry class remained overwhelmingly dependent upon, and tied to, the merchants, markets, and manufacturers of Great Britain.<sup>2</sup>

Women within planter households performed vital tasks and were recognized as important contributors to their families' financial success. Even though women were legally *femme covert* in the Old Dominion—that is, without civil, political, or economic rights apart from their husbands—they fully expected to assist their spouses and other relations in estate operations. In 1770, an eighteen-year-old Prince George County woman named Frances Bland married John Randolph of Chesterfield. The year she wed, the bride received a letter from her mother, Frances Bolling Bland, explaining that now much would be expected of her. Indeed, Frances Bolling told her young daughter that a gentry family could live “handsomely” in Virginia only if the

2. The best explanation of Virginia's late-colonial economy is T. H. Breen, *Tobacco Culture: The Mentality of the Great Tidewater Planters on the Eve of Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

mistress of the household carried out her many duties with great “care and frugality.” If a wife fell short, disaster awaited. Without a strong female hand, “the best Estates in Virginia soon dwindle and come to Little.” Therefore, she concluded, “I hope my Dear Fan you will distinguish your self by making a Virtuous tender affectionate wife and parent, a humain Mistress and a kind Neighbour. For blessed is she of whom many worldly deeds are recorded.”<sup>3</sup>

In the eighteenth century, marriages such as the Bland-Randolph union were crucial to the continuing prosperity of the Old Dominion’s gentry. Marriage not only joined two people together, it also expanded an elite family’s access to capital and credit as well as broadened its kinship network. Virginians certainly loved the members of their families, but they also relied upon these horizontal bonds for tangible assistance in their day-to-day plantation operations.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, very few plantations of the age functioned as self-sufficient entities; rather most were worked collectively with interdependent family members from several households sharing material and human resources in order to advance the entire clan’s fortunes. As one eighteenth-century Virginian recognized, “Many advantages arise from relations living near to each other. . . . Their connections, and interest are mutually strengthened . . . by a reciprocation of good offices, which cannot be exercised when they reside far a part.” The collaboration sparked by the Bland-Randolph alliance illustrates this reality. John and Frances Randolph took up house-keeping on a 1,300-acre plantation called Matoax, which lay along the northern bank of the Appomattox River. Twelve miles downriver to the east stood the Bland family seat of Cawsons. Owned by Frances’s father, Theodorick Bland Sr., the plantation was nestled at a spot on the river’s southern bank several miles before the Appomattox empties into the James. Throughout the decade, these two households not only socialized regularly, but also worked closely together for the success of the corporate family. Randolph and Bland frequently corresponded about plantation operations and business affairs.

3. Frances Bolling Bland to Frances Bland Randolph, [1770 or 1771], Tucker-Coleman Papers, Swem Library, College of William and Mary. On colonial women’s rights, see especially Linda L. Sturtz, *Within Her Power: Propertied Women in Colonial Virginia* (New York: Routledge, 2002), chaps. 1 and 2.

4. The analysis concerning family and community is informed here by Darrett B. Rutman, “The Social Web: A Prospectus for the Study of the Early American Community,” in *Insights and Parallels: Problems and Issues of American Social History*, ed. William L. O’Neill (Minneapolis, MN: Burgess Publishing, 1973), 57–88. Rutman’s study distinguishes between “horizontal” bonds among family and extended kin and “vertical” relationships linking families to local communities.

They offered assistance to each other and expected help with routine agricultural matters. The two men also shared slaves, livestock, and tools. Moreover, they marketed each other's crops and arranged for shipment overseas.<sup>5</sup>

Frances Bland Randolph by no means accepted a quiescent role within her family. Throughout her life, she was a constant and vital presence on the family's plantations. Like most eighteenth-century planter-class wives, she performed a variety of sex-specific tasks inside and adjacent to the great house, including child care, food preparation, knitting, and cloth production. Virginians also considered livestock-raising and dairying within the female sphere of labor. Theodorick Bland once saluted "Fannys Industry" both "in the Kitching and Dary." Commodities produced by females, however, were almost always for household consumption, not local or international sale. Most planter families, therefore, refused to divert an adequate portion of their arable lands to grow sufficient fodder crops to maintain large, marketable dairy and livestock herds.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to laboring for the family's daily maintenance, a gentry wife often served as a household's arbiter of genteel taste. Richard Bushman has recently noted that American homes before the Revolution served an essential quasi-public function—they reflected the owners' refinement, prestige, and influence within society. Thus, members of the elite always "wished to present their houses for admiration, . . . and polite society took an interest in viewing and evaluating houses, [just] as they enjoyed evaluating people."<sup>7</sup> Amid these realities, Virginia women insisted on participating in what Jacob Price has called the "intensely personal atmosphere of business in colonial Virginia." Wives ordered many of the elegant commodities that entered their homes. Moreover, they often trusted only other women to assist them with these crucial decisions. One tidewater woman in 1771, for instance, placed an order for china with the English firm John Norton and Sons. To ensure the most tasteful dishes possible, she demanded that Mrs. Norton select the items.

5. Richard Henry Peyton to Elizabeth Scott Peyton, Feb. 28, 1798, Peyton Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia; Theodorick Bland Sr. to John Randolph, Feb. 18, 1771, June 12, Oct. 12, 1772, Nov. 8, 1773, Bryan Papers, Alderman Library, University of Virginia.

6. Theodorick Bland Sr. to John Randolph, Feb. 18, 1771, Bryan Papers; Cynthia A. Kierner, *Beyond the Household: Women's Place in the Early South, 1700–1835* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); Lois Green Carr and Lorena S. Walsh, "Economic Diversification and Labor Organization in the Chesapeake, 1650–1820," in *Work and Labor in Early America*, ed. Stephen Innes (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 177.

7. Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America* (New York: Knopf, 1992), 132.

The great planter Mann Page had previously told the owner of the London-based company, "My Wife desires her compliments to Mrs. Norton and returns her Thanks for the trouble she was at in buying her Things last year."<sup>8</sup>

Eighteenth-century gentry women additionally worked to ensure that the formal balls, dinners, and parties that took place under their roofs were refined, graceful affairs. The reason was simple: such "hospitality rituals" further mirrored the genteel family's sociability, prosperity, and power. Toward that end, the gentry increasingly withdrew ever-larger numbers of slaves from the fields in order to expand their household staffs. Before the Revolution, George and Martha Washington kept ten of their fifty-five Mount Vernon slaves busy with chores inside the great house. Housekeepers, maids, and other domestic bondspeople assisted the plantation mistress with the multiple tasks required to keep a large, multifaceted, and often overflowing household functioning.<sup>9</sup>

Eighteenth-century eastern Virginia estates were, above all, economic operations that produced chiefly tobacco for market. Because tobacco had been the colony's staple crop for over 150 years, the work regime used to grow it was a tried and true one. Most slaves, for instance, worked as gang laborers. In the 1770s, an observer in the tidewater noted that he constantly saw "a number of Negroes" in the colony's tobacco fields "follow[ing] each other's tail the day long." Armed with hoes, gangs numbering between six and seventeen hands spent their days (depending on the month and season) transplanting, worming, weeding, or cutting the staple crop. Because tobacco is such a heavy consumer of the soil's nutrients, a marketable crop could only be grown for two to three seasons on any one particular field. Thus gang laborers were also constantly engaged in clearing land. Even as some Virginians switched to wheat and corn production for market, laborers continued to utilize traditional methods of cultivation. When Robert "King" Carter grew wheat for sale abroad, for example, his slaves prepared the fields not with plows pulled by draft animals, but with handheld hoes with which they scratched seeds into the earth.<sup>10</sup>

Although one historian has recently argued that late-eighteenth-century "men sought increasingly to exclude women from the economic . . . aspects of the public sphere" (including plantation operations), this seems not to

8. Quoted in Sturtz, *Within Her Power*, 152, 167–68.

9. Kierner, *Beyond the Household*, 15, 37.

10. Carr, "Economic Diversification," 161–63; Avery Odelle Craven, *Soil Exhaustion as a Factor in the Agricultural History of Virginia and Maryland, 1606–1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1926), 32.

have been the case in Virginia. Not only did husbands frequently name wives as the executors of their wills and provide them with powers of attorney to act on their behalf, but many Virginia women were brought up with a keen knowledge of estate management. Members of the gentry likely considered such training simple common sense. In a world where disease annually carried off numerous people, Virginians realized that many brides would spend at least part of their lives as widows. Without a complete understanding of plantation routines, a woman would imperil her family and property. Evidence indicates that the gentry took tangible steps to avoid such situations. After her first husband died and before she married George Washington, Martha Danridge Custis oversaw the 17,500 acres of land that came under her control.<sup>11</sup> Throughout her adult life (including three years as a widow), Frances Bland Randolph oversaw her household at Matoax and the landed property surrounding it. Reflecting a training that likely occurred during her adolescence, Frances frequently hired and fired estate overseers; she kept an eye on crops maturing in the fields and directed slaves accordingly. She also dealt with local artisans, suppliers, and craftsmen as well as collected debts owed to the family.<sup>12</sup>

Planters' dealings with tobacco merchants from the mother country also illustrate the operation of this staple economy and women's active participation in it. As Timothy H. Breen illustrated two decades ago, Virginia's tobacco trade at the time of the Revolution was largely channeled through a handful of familiar merchants with whom the great landowners had developed predictable and trusted ties. In fact, members of the gentry considered their commercial relationships with traders and creditors essentially as "friendships." Frances Bland Randolph's son, John Jr., later known as John Randolph of Roanoke, remembered the economic dealings that went on around him as a boy. "Each planter might be said," Randolph recalled, "to have a harbour at his door. Here he shipped his *crop* (Tobacco) mostly on his own account to London, Bristol or Glasgow, and from those ports rec.d every article of luxury or necessity (not raised by himself) which his Household and even his distant *quarter* required." Gentry women occasionally marketed crops to

11. Kierner, *Beyond the Household*, 11–13 and 44 (quotation); and Sturtz, *Within Her Power*, 146.

12. No letters survive between John and Frances Bland Randolph. The activities mentioned here, however, are found in Frances Bland's correspondence during her second marriage, to St. George Tucker (1778–1788), which is located in the Tucker-Coleman Papers. My analysis assumes that her activities were not significantly different during her first marriage (1770–1775).

overseas merchants or their tidewater representatives, indicating that elite girls were taught at a young age the details of commercial exchange. One father, for instance, gave his daughter two hogsheads of tobacco “as a venture” so that she could learn the intricacies of transatlantic trading as well as, in this case, earn profits “to purchase dresses and ornaments.” After Daniel Parke Custis died, the family’s tobacco merchant in London simply assumed that the widowed Martha understood the business of trade and exchange.<sup>13</sup>

The American Revolution began a process of fundamental change that altered both the daily routines on Old Dominion plantations and the role and position of women within the household. Historians have long debated the impact of the War for Independence on women. Almost all scholars agree that the conflict had immediate and dramatic consequences: it forced women to cope with absent husbands, invading British troops, and a stagnant war-time economy. But some historians contend that the Revolutionary period ultimately produced no “great watershed.” Carole Shammas, for example, argues that household production persisted long after the war, while female property rights remained limited and highly restricted.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, significant changes in female experiences and gender relations eventually overwhelmed perceived continuities. In the years following the war, Virginians witnessed extraordinary political changes, including a great expansion in public office-holding. Westward migration accelerated within the Old Dominion and beyond. Finally, the state’s traditional tobacco economy collapsed in the late eighteenth century, with a very different mixed economy emerging in the decades afterward. All of these alterations in the public sphere sparked reciprocal (and equally dramatic) changes inside the households of Virginia families.

The War for Independence is generally viewed as a political revolution. And politics throughout the new nation did quickly and obviously change. Numerous scholars have noted how the Revolutionary movement in Virginia and elsewhere undercut traditional patterns of deference toward the elite, blurred class distinctions among whites, and emphasized masculine political

13. Breen, *Tobacco Culture*; see esp. chap. 3, “Planters and Merchants: A Kind of Friendship,” 84–123; John Randolph of Roanoke to Josiah Quincy, July 1, 1814, John Randolph Papers, Library of Congress; Sturtz, *Within Her Power*, 146, 154–55, 159–60, 162–63.

14. Carole Shammas, “The Anglo-American Household Government in Comparative Perspective,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd series (Jan. 1995), 52:104–44, and “Early American Women and Control over Capital,” in *Women in the Age of the American Revolution*, ed. Ronald Hoffman and Peter Albert (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989).



ideals, thus accentuating gender differences. Moreover, the American Revolution multiplied the number of political offices. The Virginia Constitution of 1776, for instance, created the House of Delegates as well as an elective Senate with candidates chosen from multicounty districts. The governor and his council, moreover, were officers now selected by the General Assembly. The following decade, the United States Constitution established a system that required the election of candidates to the House of Representatives and the selection of individuals to the upper house, the Senate. During these years, the Old Dominion's government continued to create more counties as many people pushed westward. By 1800, the state possessed over one hundred counties, with each administered at the local level by between ten and thirty-six justices of the peace. In short, scores of political offices existed by the early nineteenth century, and each one required its occupant to serve away from home, sometimes for extended periods. The law also became an increasingly important profession in the state, especially as these republican institutions proliferated. Post-Revolutionary Virginia needed a class of well-educated and well-trained lawyers who could resolve property disputes quickly and efficiently and who understood the legal and political rights of citizens. Attorneys in this new age, however, had to spend enormous amounts of time studying and keeping up with changes in the law. Such men also had to travel to and participate in monthly county courts and quarterly district court sessions, as well as (for some) the periodic meetings of the Virginia Court of Appeals in Richmond. The collective result of these developments was that many prominent Virginia men spent many weeks, even months, away from their homes, farms, and plantations.<sup>15</sup>

The experiences of Randolph Harrison (1769–1839) illustrate the impact these developments had on private and family life. As a young man, Harrison was an ambitious planter and politician. Yet he found during his middle and later years that public and business responsibilities constantly separated him from the two great loves of his life: his plantation, Clifton, and his family, especially his beloved wife, Mary. In 1826, for instance, while serving in the Virginia House of Delegates, he wrote to Mary from Richmond, “The approach of the hour for a committee to meet which I belong to, leaves me barely time to express my thanks to a kind providence that my Dear [daughter] Virginia remained well at the date of your letter.” Several years later Harrison

15. Kierner, *Beyond the Household*, 103; Daniel P. Jordan, *Political Leadership in Jefferson's Virginia* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1983), 23; and A. G. Roeber, *Faithful Magistrates and Republican Lawyers: Creators of Virginia Legal Culture, 1680–1810* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981).

ran for reelection, which meant even more time away from home and family. To gain votes, he had to engage in a great deal of “hard” traveling, attend numerous county-militia musters, and stay overnight in many decrepit inns. “So goes my life,” he sadly concluded in one letter to his wife. Although busy advancing his own career, Harrison suffered acutely from these separations. And it fell to Mary to bolster her husband’s flagging spirits. Indeed, he depended on his wife to keep him cheerful at all times. “[I]f you could know,” he once explained from Richmond, “how much more I suffer in your absence, you would be satisfied that the little happiness that is in store for my remaining days, perhaps even my existence, depends upon you.”<sup>16</sup>

Although women had to provide emotional support for their hardworking husbands, they themselves often resented the new political and legal order that had brought on such separations. In 1804, Elizabeth Gamble married a rising attorney named William Wirt. Despite his constant business excursions away from home, Elizabeth was initially determined to be a true partner to her husband. She not only managed their household (periodically located in Williamsburg, Norfolk, or Richmond), but also assisted her husband in his legal affairs. She advised him on what cases to take, copied his correspondence, and forwarded important messages to his associates. Nevertheless, having been raised at a time when economic cooperation between spouses meant much more togetherness, Elizabeth quickly felt herself overburdened, lonely, and embittered by her situation. Tensions within the marriage eventually bubbled to the surface, with Elizabeth pleading with William to stay more at home, while he worked ever harder (and traveled more) in order to achieve success in his chosen career.<sup>17</sup>

Another factor that transformed daily life was the growing rate of westward migration, especially among the tidewater’s old gentry. After the Revolution, individuals and families left eastern Virginia and pushed deep into the Piedmont or across the Blue Ridge Mountains into the Shenandoah Valley. This migration was spurred not only by a general decline in the tidewater’s soil fertility, but also by a fairly well developed economy in western Virginia and rising land prices throughout that region. These conditions created a push-pull phenomenon that significantly broadened the state’s settlement pattern. Substantial towns were also rising up in the western mountains—towns

16. Randolph Harrison to Mary Harrison, Dec. 9, 1826, Apr. 21, 1830, Jan. 18, 1829; see also Randolph Harrison to Mary Harrison, Apr. 16, 1824, all in Randolph Harrison Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

17. Anya Jabour, *Marriage in the Early Republic: Elizabeth and William Wirt and the Companionate Ideal* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 60, 91.

that served as loci for local trade, thus drawing even more settlers west. By 1800, Staunton, in the center of the Shenandoah, was a municipality of 1,100 inhabitants, with eight inns for travelers and fifteen to eighteen stores filled with manufactured goods from Baltimore and Philadelphia. Ninety-six miles to the north stood Winchester, which had over 2,000 inhabitants as well as an array of inns and businesses. As historians have noted, westward migration exerted an enormous impact on Virginians of the post-Revolutionary age. It certainly altered the lives of Frances Bland Randolph's children. In 1791, her eldest son, Richard, moved west out of the tidewater to Cumberland County with his new bride (and distant cousin) Judith Randolph. John Randolph Jr. relocated southwest onto a Charlotte County plantation called Roanoke. Frances's children from her second marriage to St. George Tucker also found themselves moving west in search of new opportunities. The youngest, Nathaniel Beverley Tucker, went to Roanoke to join his half-brother John. Henry St. George Tucker moved to Winchester in 1802 to begin a law practice in the counties surrounding the growing city. That same year, Henry's sister Fanny married a now-widowed John Coalter, after which the pair traveled to Augusta County in the Shenandoah to live and work on a nine hundred-acre farm called Elm Grove.<sup>18</sup>

As members of the old tidewater families relocated west, they realized that they were moving into a very different land, both culturally and socially. Some migrants even referred to moving west of the Blue Ridge Mountains as "crossing the Alps." A kinsman of Frances Tucker's children, George Tucker, also moved west in the early 1800s. He eventually settled in Pittsylvania County to practice law. But Tucker was shocked at the crude, boorish people with whom he had to deal. He later recreated some of his experiences in the novel *The Valley of Shenandoah*. The book tells the story of a gentry widow and her college-aged son and daughter forced to leave the refined environs of eastern Virginia by personal debts and overall economic decline. Once in the valley, however, the family confronted a host of German and Scotch-

18. David Hackett Fischer and James C. Kelly, *Bound Away: Virginia and the Westward Movement* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), chap. 2; Robert D. Mitchell, *Commercialism and Frontier: Perspectives on the Early Shenandoah Valley* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1977), 53–54, 91–92, 143, 156–57, 161, 174–75, 187–88, 198; Jackson Turner Main, "The Distribution of Property in Post-Revolutionary Virginia," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 41 (1954): 247–54, 256; Joseph Addison Waddell, *Annals of Augusta County, Virginia: From 1726 to 1871*, 2nd ed. (Staunton, VA: C. R. Caldwell, 1902), 349–51; and Phillip Hamilton, *The Making and Unmaking of a Revolutionary Family: The Tuckers of Virginia, 1752–1830* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), chap. 4.

Irish settlers whose manners and mores seemed shockingly raw, open, and rude.<sup>19</sup> Other gentry migrants had similar experiences and made identical observations. Even though many western counties had been settled for well over a generation by the early 1800s, frontier behavior—such as frequent fist and knife fights, drinking bouts, and an open egalitarianism in social relations—were common sights. The arrival of planter families did bring some permanent changes to western Virginia. The gentry, for instance, established Anglican churches and brought many slaves with them. Members of the old elite also built framed houses, which (although smaller than the great mansions of the tidewater) were much more elegant than the crude structures that had gone up during the valley's first years of settlement.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, these changes brought by the old gentry only gradually worked their way into western Virginia's culture. Furthermore, the planter class was never able to replicate the tidewater's material life, social values, and political and economic hegemony.

Westward expansion also shattered established kinship networks. In the late-colonial age, the tidewater's gentry families were broadly defined, close-knit, and thoroughly interdependent. As planters moved (sometimes more than one hundred miles) to the west, it became impossible to sustain these traditional bonds. Households in the western part of the state, therefore, began to function largely as isolated entities, which interacted not through extended family members, but within the local community and area economy. These new arrangements left many recent arrivals profoundly lonely and unsettled. Scholars have recently argued that early-nineteenth-century spouses who pushed westward together were themselves deeply divided about relocation. In the new age of independence, men sought freedom from old and, to their minds, constricting kinship ties. Women, on the other hand, attempted to preserve such attachments; when their efforts failed, and changes were forced upon them, wives became alienated and depressed by their new surroundings and circumstances.<sup>21</sup>

19. Samuel Campbell to John Coalter, Aug. 30, 1791, Brown-Tucker-Coalter Papers; George Tucker, *The Valley of Shenandoah, or Memoirs of the Graysons* (1824; reprint, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1970).

20. Richard R. Beeman, *The Evolution of the Southern Backcountry: A Case Study of Lunenburg County, Virginia, 1746–1832* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 205–6. On the eighteenth-century settlement of the Shenandoah Valley, see Mitchell, *Commercialism and Frontier*, 56, 175.

21. Joan E. Cashin, *A Family Venture: Men and Women on the Southern Frontier* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Women's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 37, 165–68.

Judith Randolph, for example, had only reluctantly moved west with her husband, Richard, to a Cumberland County plantation named Bizarre. She admitted, "I love the company of my *friends* too much" and feared that they would avoid Bizarre because of the difficulties of traveling such a distance from the tidewater. Judith's situation proved worse than she had feared. A year and a half after they had relocated, the couple found themselves embroiled in a devastating scandal, when Richard was accused of having an affair with Judith's sister, Nancy, who also lived on the estate. In November 1792, Nancy suffered a late-term miscarriage during a visit to Randolph and Mary Harrison's plantation. Soon afterward the Harrisons' slaves claimed Richard had killed and buried the infant. Although the Cumberland County Court refused to formally charge Randolph, the story shattered the family's reputation throughout the state. Shunned by the local elite, Judith (who had remained loyal to her husband throughout the ordeal) had to cope with greater loneliness than she had ever imagined. Even after Richard unexpectedly died in 1796, the young widow bitterly claimed that she lived in "entire seclusion from society." She lamented to one correspondent, "my heart sinks within me when I reflect that . . . there is not within 40 miles, a being to whom I could apply in any case of difficulty or distress." When friends failed to write or visit as promised, Judith turned caustic and unforgiving. Mary Harrison, for instance, once canceled a trip to Bizarre, leaving Judith alone, seething with anger, and unable to conceal it. "Your resolution not to visit me this summer has both disappointed and mortified me extremely." She then sarcastically noted that she would now have to "delight" in a "distant and imaginary converse with my friend."<sup>22</sup>

After relocating to Augusta County, Fanny Coalter often found herself lonely and miserable. Not only did she miss her tidewater kin, but her husband's law career multiplied her difficulties. Like William Wirt, John Coalter frequently had to travel on the county court circuit. Even others noticed that John Coalter "is never at home" because he "labor[s] hard at the Courts." Fanny dreaded her husband's absences, despondently labeling them "his term[s] of banishment." In 1803, she wrote, "The idea of parting with my

22. Judith Randolph to Mary Harrison, July 8 and May 26, 1798; see also Judith Randolph to Mary Harrison, Nov. 17, 1790, Feb. 15, 1798, and Dec. 7, 1800, all in Harrison Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society. For more information about the Bizarre scandal, see Cynthia A. Kierner, *Scandal at Bizarre: Rumor and Reputation in Jefferson's America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); and Christopher L. Doyle, "The Randolph Scandal in Early National Virginia, 1792–1815: New Voices in the 'Court of Honour,'" *Journal of Southern History* 69 (2003): 283–318.

dear Husband has so wholly ingrossed me for some days previous to his departure that I was unfit for any employment. . . . It was a hard trial to part with him." Eight years and many separations later, John's "banishments" had not become easier for his wife to bear. "Ah! My dear husband," she wrote in 1811, "you do not know the misery of being left so long without your assistance and Counsel."<sup>23</sup>

The American Revolution not only changed the state's settlement pattern and political system, it also thoroughly destabilized Virginia's traditional staple economy. During the war, tobacco exports to Great Britain completely ceased, and, except for a brief spurt in the mid-1780s, they never recovered. At the same time, demand for grain products and flour grew significantly, especially during the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. The economic response of most white Virginians was not simply to shift from one staple crop to another—i.e., from tobacco to wheat; rather, a mixed economy emerged in the post-Revolutionary years—one marked by agricultural diversification, denser economic networks within local communities, and a reduction in the reliance on external markets.<sup>24</sup> Historians have noted other economic changes at work. Charles Sellers, for instance, has written about a "Market Revolution" that swept the United States in the early national period. Other scholars argue that economic changes were more evolutionary than revolutionary. Nonetheless, by 1815, merchants and producers alike no longer thought in terms of trusted "friendships." Traders secured business now only because they offered several pennies more per bushel or per hogshead than their nearest competitors. As one post-Revolutionary trader put it, prices for particular goods and crops now moved solely by "the spur of the market." Virginia planters had to deal, moreover, with a wider number of merchants, manufacturers, and suppliers located in a variety of locations, including Richmond, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York City.<sup>25</sup>

23. Judith Randolph to Mary Harrison, Feb. 26, 1806, Harrison Family Papers; Fanny Tucker Coalter to Frances Davenport, Jan. 23, 1803, Bryan Papers; Fanny Tucker Coalter to John Coalter, Apr. 20, 1811, Brown-Tucker-Coalter Papers; see also Fanny Tucker Coalter to John Coalter, Apr. 18, 1804, and Polly Coalter Tucker to Fanny Tucker Coalter, Nov. 28, 1809, Brown-Tucker-Coalter Papers.

24. Waddell, *Annals of Augusta County*, 341; and John T. Schlotterbeck, "The 'Social Economy' of an Upper South Community: Orange and Greene Counties, Virginia, 1815–1860," in *Class, Conflict, and Consensus: Antebellum Southern Community Studies*, ed. Orville Vernon Burton and Robert C. McMath Jr. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 5.

25. Quotation from John Barnes to St. George Tucker, Jan. 12, 1794, Tucker-Coleman Papers; see also Randolph Harrison to Mary Harrison, May 8, 1817, Randolph Harrison Papers; Elizabeth Scott Peyton to Richard Henry Peyton, Oct. 4, 1827, Peyton

As a result of these changes, women worked on estates that were dramatically different from those of the Revolutionary age in terms of output, size, and operation. Smaller, more diversified estates with fewer slaves per household became the norm. Virginians realized that in times of unpredictable markets, reliance on a single cash crop created a potentially catastrophic situation. Ledger books left by nineteenth-century Virginians indicate that many continued to produce at least some tobacco, but they also cultivated wheat, corn, oats, and rye for market. And farmers typically prepared the soil using horse- or ox-drawn plows instead of handheld hoes. Thus, they now had to care for draft animals. Virginians also engaged in animal husbandry for market with some couples deriving a significant portion of their income from such activities. Success in livestock production, however, required improved fencing and housing as well as the cultivation of more fodder crops and winterfeeding.<sup>26</sup>

This new agricultural routine created new patterns of daily life. White masters of both sexes altered the traditional management of their bondpeople. The gang-labor system was no longer feasible in a mixed agricultural system. Because the growing cycles of various market crops overlapped, masters now had to synchronize their field hands' labor in order to maximize output. The month of June was especially critical on most early-nineteenth-century Virginia farms when laborers cut tobacco, weeded corn, and sowed wheat. If any of these tasks remained undone or was indifferently performed, the crop was often lost. Thus, instead of large gangs working together, usually at one time-consuming task per day, slaves now labored in small groups or individually, performing up to a half-dozen separate jobs per day.<sup>27</sup> This new work regime required whites to manage and oversee their laborers in a far different manner than in the eighteenth century.

The mixed economy of the early Republic and antebellum period also generated a denser network of vertical ties throughout local communities—ties binding area farmers, processors, artisans, and merchants to one another. Wheat produced for export, for example, was increasingly sent to nearby “bleaching mills” to be ground into flour. It was then packed into barrels con-

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Family Papers. For more information about the development of commercial markets in the Early Republic, see, among others, Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); and Richard L. Bushman, “Markets and Composite Farms in Early America,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series (July 1998), 55:351–74.

26. Schlotterbeck, “Social Economy,” 6, 10; Mitchell, *Commercialism and Frontier*, 120–21, 136–39; Carr, “Economic Diversification,” 176–77.

27. Schlotterbeck, “Social Economy,” 10–11.

structed by local coopers before being shipped by traders to markets elsewhere. The number of independent blacksmiths and wheelwrights also grew in many parts of Virginia, with artisans obtaining work from local farmers outfitting horses, making and repairing farm equipment, and fixing wagons, carts, and carriages. Shops and general stores become increasingly common sights, with small merchants selling an array of groceries, hardware, cloth, and clothing as well as some manufactured goods.<sup>28</sup>

Nineteenth-century diaries and business correspondence reveal these alterations at work and illustrate the many contributions made by women. John Lewis's 1812 commonplace book, for instance, explains how his farm, located fifteen to twenty miles west of Fredericksburg in central Virginia, operated. Not only did his daughters, Jenny and Amey, "knit" clothes and "make soap" for the household, but they also helped produce "coarse cotton," which Lewis then sold to local weavers to be spun into finished cloth for the market. Mary Harrison helped at Clifton with many tasks associated with the new mixed economy, including working with her husband to purchase from local manufacturers slave clothes that were "handsome[,] good and . . . cheap." Mary also prepared individual slaves for sale in central Virginia, making sure they were properly outfitted and presentable for the auction block. The Harrisons trained their children to operate within the new order as well. The couple especially relied upon their youngest daughter, Susannah, for a number of tasks. When once in Richmond visiting her father, for instance, she patronized the capital's general stores with a "memorandum" in hand from her mother listing an array of goods to be purchased. "I have never seen such a poor show in my life," the young woman confessed afterward. The desired articles were both shabby and expensive. For instance, the calico cloth had to be culled from "the brick row"—i.e., the back row—and, therefore, Susannah ordered her mother to "suspend your opinion on my taste." The total bill, moreover, came to "upwards of 60 dollars" and she forlornly observed "how money flies when one gets to shopping!" The Harrisons also expected Susannah to deal and negotiate with local artisans. When the family carriage once broke down before an important event, the young woman assured her mother, "I shall do my best to hurry to repairers."<sup>29</sup>

28. Waddell, *Annals of Augusta*, 349; Schlotterbeck, "Social Economy," 13–14.

29. John Lewis, commonplace book, 1812, VHS; Randolph Harrison to Mary Harrison, Dec. 9, 1826, Randolph Harrison Papers; and Susannah Isham Harrison to Mary Harrison, Oct. 20, 1829, Apr. 21, 1828, Harrison Family Papers. See also Elizabeth Collins Lee to Zaccheus Collins, Mar. 16, 1800, Richard Bland Lee Papers; and Kierner, *Beyond the Household*, 172.



With no kinsmen nearby and husbands so frequently absent on business or politics, the burden of managing these post-Revolutionary estates often fell completely upon plantation wives. Fanny Coalter, for example, largely ran her farm because of John's work at the courts. Like many upper-class husbands, Coalter confidently expected his wife to take up the management reins of the farm. Fanny's central role on the estate was certainly recognized. "She is the axis on which all turn and depend," her husband explained. Even though the Coalters hired several overseers over the years, such men tended to be lax, inefficient, and frequently missing. Thus, from 1802 to 1813, Fanny performed many oversight activities alone. In addition to running affairs inside the farmhouse (which included caring for her three children), she usually read the couple's thirteen slaves their orders each morning, oversaw the plowing and planting of fields, directed the spreading of manure, and ordered the mowing and "putting up" of the estate's hay. Fanny also dealt with local merchants and craftsmen in order to obtain draft animals, tools, and other manufactured goods that the household itself could not produce. Animal husbandry, too, fell within her sphere of responsibility. Two days after Christmas 1809, she wrote her parents, "I was so overwhelmed with business last week that I had not one moment to devote to you, except in thought . . . we killed *our* Hogs on Monday [Christmas day]." While Coalter slaves likely performed the dirty work of actually killing the animals, Fanny had to process the carcasses—including emptying and cleaning the small intestines, turning fat into lard, and chopping and seasoning large slabs of meat—an arduous, time-consuming, and exhausting set of tasks. Indeed, Fanny concluded that "all the business of putting away Lard &c: was going forward so that I was completely bewildered."<sup>30</sup>

Fanny Coalter was not alone among women in her endeavors. Her sister-in-law, Polly Coalter Tucker, lived for a time on John Randolph's Roanoke

30. Regarding Fanny Coalter's central role on the plantation, see John Coalter to St. George Tucker, May 18, 1811, Brown-Tucker-Coalter Papers. On the shortcomings of the Coalters' managers, see the couple's letters from the Spring of 1809, John Coalter to Fanny Tucker Coalter, Apr. 4, Apr. 15, 1809, Fanny Tucker Coalter to John Coalter, Apr. 11, Apr. 26, 1809, Brown-Tucker-Coalter Papers. Concerning Fanny Coalter's oversight activities at Elm Grove, see John Coalter to Fanny Tucker Coalter, [1802?], [1807], Apr. 4, Sept. 10, 1809, Sept. 8, 1810, Fanny Tucker Coalter to John Coalter, Mar. 9, 1804, Sept. 7, 1809, Oct. 3, 1810, [John Coalter?] to [?], Apr. 1809, Brown-Tucker-Coalter Papers; John Coalter to Frances Davenport, Sept. 26, 1811, Bryan Papers. For Fanny Coalter's animal husbandry duties, see Fanny Tucker Coalter to St. George and Lelia Skipwith Tucker, Dec. 27, 1809, Tucker-Coleman Papers. On the specific tasks involved in processing hogs, see Clinton, *Plantation Mistress*, 23.

plantation located in south-central Virginia. Because Randolph was often in Washington, D.C., as a member of Congress, and her husband, Nathaniel Beverley Tucker, was a new lawyer traveling more often than not on his county court circuit, Polly frequently had to cope with matters on her own (especially since Randolph rarely hired competent overseers). She wrote the congressman in the late autumn of 1809 about the many things over which she had to watch:

Neither Mr. Davis or the Waggoners have returned, and I can only tell you that blankets and leather were not brought up the last time. Some of the Negroes who rolled tobacco from the Lower quarter got home Saturday night, and say the rest will probably be here tomorrow. I enclose Mr. Scots bill of the articles sent up. There are besides two canisters of Gun Powder—I have sent particular directions to Billy to make the Coulters, hoes and traces.<sup>31</sup>

Virginia's complex transition from a staple to a mixed economy was neither easy nor smooth for most involved. Many within the gentry found themselves not only wrestling with isolation and new agricultural practices, but also living in reduced circumstances. The collapse of the tobacco trade, less access to generous lines of credit from overseas, and the emergence of the market economy ultimately meant smaller houses, less furniture and china, and fewer slaves. It also meant that Virginia plantations were becoming family farms. By the early nineteenth century, as white gentry families throughout Virginia struggled to adjust and maintain their economic position, men increasingly depended upon women. Thomas Jefferson wrote, for example, "the evils" caused by "improvident management" could be "arrest[ed] or lessen[ed]" by "a wife imbued with principles of prudence." Therefore, plantation mistresses not only continued to keep their own account books, they recorded more diligently than ever every expenditure at local stores, noted each penny spent on slaves' supplies, and kept tabs on any dollar that came into their families' hands.<sup>32</sup> Some designed retrenchment strategies to allow some family property to be passed down to the next generation. Judith Randolph frequently lamented both her husband's "small patrimony" as well as

31. Polly Coalter Tucker to John Randolph, Nov. 28, 1809, Bryan Papers. See also Judith Randolph to John Randolph, Sept. 25, 1796, Polly Coalter Tucker to Frances Tucker Coalter, Nov. 12, Nov. 19, 1809, Beverley Tucker to John Randolph, June 17, 1810, Bryan Papers. Concerning John Randolph and "worthless overseers," see Judith Randolph to John Randolph, Oct. 15, 1813, Bryan Papers.

32. Jefferson quoted in Kierner, *Beyond the Household*, 171; and Clinton, *Plantation Mistress*, 31.

“our large and unprofitable family of Negroes.” Such matters, she complained, had created many “pecu[ni]ary embarrassments” which would likely leave her two children destitute. Thus, “in order to keep out of debt,” she wrote that she stayed home alone at Bizarre, where she would “spin and weave and spend nothing.”<sup>33</sup>

Judith Randolph’s woes were not unique. Ann Barraud Cocke, mistress of the tidewater plantation of Bremo, realized her family’s fortunes were declining. She assured her husband, however, that she was adapting herself to the difficult times. “[I]f good management consists in making a little go a great way and having that little appear to as an advantage as one is capable of doing, I may be said to be a good [manager].” A widow named Elizabeth Scott Peyton helped supervise her family’s plantation located in Fauquier County. Like many once-affluent gentry clans, the Peytons confronted many debts in the early nineteenth century, which threatened both their lifestyle and social status. Elizabeth proved to be an aggressive manager, however, which helped the family come to grips with its situation. With the assistance of her son and “an excellent overseer,” she closely supervised the estate’s production and sale of tobacco, wheat, corn, potatoes, and peaches. She insisted, moreover, that the family rent the estate’s outlying tracts to tenant farmers as well as hire out surplus slaves to other masters in return for cash. By such close attention to “our domestic concerns,” Elizabeth Peyton eventually wrote that “we are running thro our debts as fast as wee can.”<sup>34</sup>

Some plantation mistresses were neither so successful nor so fortunate. In 1795, a Philadelphia merchant’s daughter named Elizabeth Collins married Richard Bland Lee, thus entering the ranks of the one of Virginia’s most prestigious clans. After the wedding ceremony, the bride moved onto Richard’s estate, Sully. Given the Lees’ fame both in the Old Dominion and the nation, Elizabeth probably expected a happy and prosperous life as a plantation mistress. Her brother-in-law, however, was the famous “Light-Horse” Harry Lee. Hoping to benefit from the westward migration of thousands of Americans, the former Revolutionary general participated in a number of land speculation ventures both in Virginia and elsewhere. Unfortunately, none produced the wealth Lee had optimistically expected. They instead left him deeply in debt. Lee also dominated his younger brother and convinced him (and some-

33. Judith Randolph to Mary Harrison, Nov. 17, 1798, Jan. 2, 1802, [1806?], Harrison Family Papers.

34. Kierner, *Beyond the Household*, 171 (Ann Barraud Cocke quotation); Elizabeth Peyton Scott to Richard Henry Peyton, Feb. 25, 1825, Sept. 1, 1827, Apr. 1830, Peyton Family Papers.

times Elizabeth) to cosign many loans. By 1804, creditors everywhere clamored for repayment, forcing Elizabeth to admit to her brother Zaccheus Collins, “[W]e have suffer’d so many inconveniences from his [Harry Lee’s] embarrassments.” Nonetheless, she remained confident that he “wishes to do justice” to all involved. But the situation only grew worse. By 1818, when Harry Lee died, Sully had already been sold to satisfy creditors and, as Elizabeth lamented, “Poverty” stared the surviving members of “the Proud family. . . of Lee” in the face. She confessed to her daughter that their situation was indeed “hard to bear and reconcile.” The following decade brought even more hardship. Following Richard’s death in 1827, Elizabeth lived alone in Washington, D.C., with “no friend near, no advisor.” In fact, all she ran into in the capital’s streets were “creditors and [the] self-interested.” At one point, she wrote to Zaccheus, “Alas! My Brother how some of our family tumble to pieces.”<sup>35</sup>

To cope with these many new realities and hardships, Virginia women changed not only their economic practices and routines, but also their behavior and attitudes in a variety of ways. Historians have frequently noted that white women relied heavily upon black slaves to work both inside and outside the main house. The available labor allowed mistresses to focus on numerous tasks simultaneously and provided them with a modicum of leisure time.<sup>36</sup> But some white women depended upon their slaves for more than labor. In the antebellum age, many grew emotionally dependent upon their bondspeople and claimed a sentimental attachment to them that is absent in gentry correspondence of the Revolutionary age. Even though mistresses often lacked a white male presence on their farms (Judith Randolph once remarked, “there is not a white soul on the plantation but myself. . . .”) and despite periodic rumors of rebellions, slaves started to be mentioned and remembered in nineteenth-century letters, especially by white women who had pulled up stakes and moved west.<sup>37</sup> Often the only people white women initially knew and claimed to trust were the bondspeople who had

35. Elizabeth Collins Lee to Zaccheus Collins, Mar. 1804, Elizabeth Collins Lee to Cornelia Lee, June 21, [1818?], Elizabeth Collins Lee to Zaccheus Collins, Mar. 27, 1827, July 8, 1825, all in Richard Bland Lee Papers.

36. Kierner, *Beyond the Household*, chap. 5; and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), chap. 3.

37. Judith Randolph to Fanny Tucker Coalter, Dec. 9, 1805, Brown-Tucker-Coalter Papers; see also Judith Randolph to John Randolph, Nov. 3, 1809, Bryan Papers. See Lelia Skipwith Tucker to Fanny Tucker Coalter, Dec. 26, [1808?], Brown-Tucker-Coalter Papers, for rumors about a thwarted rebellion planned by slaves in Nelson County, at the foothills of the Blue Ridge.

gone west with them. Fanny Coalter often wrote of the slaves she lived with at Elm Grove—house slaves with whom she had likely grown up. Whenever she was away from the farm, moreover, Fanny's letters home reveal a genuine curiosity and concern about her servants. On one extended trip, for example, she wrote, "How is Celia? Charity is very well, and requests to be remembered to all at home not forgetting little Aggy and those who take care of her."<sup>38</sup>

Susannah Harrison wrote in a similar vein from Clifton. In one long letter to her mother, she explained, "The Servants have all been particularly enquiring after you all." The young woman related how "Dilsey," "Fanny," "Absalom," and "Aunt Lucy" each sent their "love" and best wishes. At the epistle's end, however, Susannah wrote several lines that revealed not only the true position of blacks at Clifton, but also her own emotional dependence upon their perceived devotion. "It seems as if I am throwing away time in delivering the [slaves'] messages so exactly, but it always affords me pleasure to witness the native affection of these poor creatures." Elizabeth Scott Peyton also found emotional comfort in the supposed faithfulness of her slaves. She explained in one letter to her son, "The se[r]vants are behaving remarkably well and all send their love to you." Loyalty, fidelity, and good behavior, however, counted for little when they collided with the material interests and whims of the white family. Not only did Elizabeth Peyton frequently hire out the family's surplus slaves, she sometimes sold them off. She once commented in another letter to her son, "As for 'Poor Pilate,' whom you have honored with a recollection, he was some time ago made a present to Rich[ar]d Ashton who conceived a violent fancy for him."<sup>39</sup>

In addition to convincing themselves that their slaves loved them, nineteenth-century women turned to one another for support and companionship in a manner unknown in Revolutionary times. Formal visiting by

38. Fanny Tucker Coalter to Frances Davenport, Jan. 23, 1803, Bryan Papers; see also Fanny Tucker Coalter to John Coalter, Sept. 12, 1810, Brown-Tucker-Coalter Papers. Others in the Tucker family soon wrote about slaves in a manner similar to Fanny Coalter's. For instance, see Lelia Skipwith Tucker to Fanny Tucker Coalter, Apr. 1805, St. George Tucker to Fanny Tucker Coalter, Feb. 4, [1804?], St. George Tucker to John Coalter, Sept. 21, 1808, Brown-Tucker-Coalter Papers. For more information about slavery in the Shenandoah Valley where Fanny Coalter lived, see Mitchell, *Commercialism and Frontier*, 128–29.

39. Susannah Isham Harrison to Mary Harrison, Sept. 1, 1825, Harrison Family Papers; Elizabeth Scott Peyton to Richard Henry Peyton, Sept. 1, 1827, May 21, 1829, Peyton Family Papers. See also Susannah Isham Harrison to Mary Harrison, Feb. 28, 1827, Harrison Family Papers.

gentry women seems to have been a phenomena of the Jeffersonian and antebellum ages. Before the War for Independence, women entertained guests at formal dinners and parties within their homes, but such gatherings were almost always integrated affairs with men and women sharing food, drink, and genteel conversation. George Tucker remembered that, as late as the 1790s, "women then were not in the habit of going much out of their neighborhoods." This changed the following decade, however, with the state's economy shifting, westward expansion quickening, and menfolk often away on business and/or public matters. To relieve the isolation and loneliness, women wrote and visited more frequently. As Cynthia Kierner explains, "Letters provided [women] with comfort and amusement, relieving the tedium of domestic isolation." Face-to-face encounters were even better. Mary Ann Johnson, a Staunton neighbor of Fanny Coalter's, scribbled a brief letter from Richmond explaining that she could not write to her friend at greater length, "[a]s I have some *fashionable* visits to make this morning." On farms and plantations, visits by women were longer and likely more emotionally satisfying. An 1829 diary written by an unmarried Albemarle County woman named Elizabeth Coles records that her brothers, who were public figures and businessmen, were often away at Richmond and elsewhere. At the same time, however, she noted frequent visits by women traveling alone who helped compensate for the lost companionship of male family members. On August 9, for instance, she wrote, "Mrs. Rutherford and her Children got here" and remained for several days. Polly Coalter Tucker explicitly made this linkage between absent menfolk and the importance of female visits. After her friend (and her brother's mother-in-law) Frances Davenport arrived at Roanoke for an extended visit, Polly was beside herself with joy. She wrote that Davenport "is a greater comfort to me than you can imagine," adding "I scarcely think of [my husband] Beverly's absence now that she is with me."<sup>40</sup>

Many women (and men) also gravitated to a much more emotionally charged form of Christianity in response to the changes they witnessed. Historian Richard Beeman argues in his study of Lundenburg County that the

40. George Tucker, "The Autobiography of George Tucker," *Bermuda Historical Quarterly*, 18 (1961): 98–99; Kierner, *Beyond the Household*, 153; Mary Ann Johnson to Fanny Tucker Coalter, June 23, 1807, Bryan Papers; Elizabeth Coles diary, 1829, Virginia Historical Society; Polly Coalter Tucker to Fanny Coalter Tucker, Nov. 19, 1809, Bryan Papers. See also Susannah Isham Harrison to Mary Harrison, Sept. 1, 1825, Feb. 28, 1827, May 26, 1827, Harrison Family Papers. On the general topic of female friendships during this age, see Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1 (1975): 1–30.

outpouring of religious fervor that swept much of Virginia from the 1790s onward, “suggest[s] a return to that spirit of *communitas*,” with citizens reaching out not only for a loving God and salvation, but also for “a sense of common identity” in an age of rapid transformation. Judith Randolph explained to her friends that, like them, she always tried to remember God’s mercy and bend “in grateful adoration before my Creator for those blessings I still possess.” Randolph Harrison’s household at Clifton also embraced sentimental religion and, with evangelical passion, members determinedly sought out new followers of Christ. “Oh how your account of my dear brother Carter glads my eyes!” Susannah Harrison cried to her mother in 1825. “[C]an we be so blessed as to have another member of our family inquiring ‘what must I do to be saved?!’” Gentry women found themselves caught up in the mass revivals of the age, especially after evangelical leaders came to support the elite’s position on slavery and race inequality. A twenty-five-year-old Carroll County woman named Amanda Roberts was drawn time and again to enormous camp meetings near her farm. Her diary is filled with references to attending such gatherings with friends and family members. Sometimes these meetings even stretched from Sundays into Mondays. In September 1845, for instance, Amanda noted, “Monday morning I went with James to meeting again. I saw many sights at camp meeting; their singing, shouting, and screaming was tremendous.”<sup>41</sup>

Despite the comfort women derived from close relationships with some slaves, female friendships, and sentimental Christianity, most members of the gentry regarded the nineteenth century’s first decades as hard ones. After her husband’s death, Judith Randolph felt that her days were filled only with woe, hardship, and approaching poverty. She despaired of ever catching “that phantom, happiness” and longed for the “welcome invitation to rejoin my beloved husband” beyond the “transitory state” in which she now existed. Judith also taught her children to contract their material wants, as life for the gentry would never return to the grand style of the previous century. Like most women of the old elite clans, Judith did not blame her problems on the structural economic and social changes that had swept through Jeffersonian society. Rather she turned on herself. “I see all my former errors,” she once explained, “which . . . will prove the final ruin of my family.” In a nos-

41. Beeman, *Southern Backcountry*, 199; see also Schlotterbeck, “Social Economy,” 15; Judith Randolph to Mary Harrison, May 26, 1798, Susannah Isham Harrison to Mary Harrison, Dec. 3, 1825, Susannah Isham Harrison to Mary Harrison, Dec. 17, 1828, all in Harrison Family Papers; Kierner, *Beyond the Household*, 141; Amanda Jane (Cooley) Roberts diary, entries of Aug. 3, Sept. 21, Sept. 28, 1845, VHS.

talgic reference to the past Revolutionary age, she told her brother-in-law John Randolph, "How differently would your admirable mother [Frances Randolph Tucker] have acted in such a situation."<sup>42</sup>

Fanny Coalter also blamed herself for the hardships of her age. Even though she worked at Elm Grove "like a ploughman" (as her brother once put it), the farm never prospered under her management. Thus, over the years, she repeatedly apologized to her husband for "my want on talents . . . but I cannot help it." She referred to herself as a "goodfornothing" and "perfect Ignoramus." Like Judith Randolph, Fanny Coalter did not see that the problems she confronted lay primarily in the structural changes taking place within Virginia's economy and thus were largely beyond her control. Instead she too fixated on the memory of Frances Randolph Tucker. "In truth," she commented to her husband, "I think if I had . . . some of my Mothers talents for Management," she could then keep the estate's slaves at their work and produce earnings that would benefit the entire family.<sup>43</sup> But it was not to be. Fanny Coalter died in 1813 at the age of thirty-four believing herself to have been a failure. Without her presence, however, her husband and their three children soon packed up and left Elm Grove altogether.

The experiences of these Virginia women explain much about the transformations in daily life during the early Republic and antebellum era. On the surface, there appear to have been few significant changes: women gained no new legal rights and privileges in the early national age, nor did much change with regard to expectations placed upon females to contribute to the family household, but a closer look reveals profound alterations that women had to cope with and react to. Following the Revolution, the state's economy, political system, and settlement patterns all moved in very new and different directions. Although these changes occurred in what historians often call the "public sphere," they nonetheless bled into and altered the private lives of Virginia women and their families. This evolution clarifies the complexities of the early nineteenth century and helps us to better understand the process of change as one era gave way to the next. Finally, these experiences illustrate how broad transformations, about which scholars sometimes write in a detached and abstract manner, deeply affected the lives of ordinary people.

42. Judith Randolph to Mary Harrison, July 8, 1798, May 26, 1798, Harrison Family Papers; Judith Randolph to John Randolph, Nov. 3, 1809, Bryan Papers.

43. Nathaniel Beverley Tucker to St. George Tucker, May 11, 1804, Tucker-Coleman Papers; Fanny Tucker Coalter to John Coalter, Apr. 11, 1804, Brown-Tucker-Coalter Papers.



Jane C. Washington, Family, and  
Nation at Mount Vernon, 1830–1855

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*Jean B. Lee*

In an upstairs bedroom at Mount Vernon one June morning in 1832, Jane Charlotte Washington sat at the bedside of her husband, John Augustine Washington, the estate's incumbent owner. For many months he had been ill with a lung condition accompanied by hemorrhaging, and on that morning his wife and a physician were doing their best to keep John Augustine quiet and comfortable. When the sick man heard a sudden "commotion" downstairs, however, he grew agitated and wanted to know what was wrong. Upon investigating, the physician discovered "a party of strangers, who, in spite of the protestations of the servants that their master lay ill, had forced an entrance into the Hall, and were insisting on going through a portion of the rooms." Amid the "clamor," Jane suddenly let out a "piercing shriek" while her husband hemorrhaged uncontrollably. Within minutes he was dead.

This essay draws upon the author's research concerning Mount Vernon's links to the nation between the Revolution and the Civil War. By making the rich manuscript resources at Mount Vernon available, Barbara A. McMillan and Mary V. Thompson have been instrumental in forwarding this work. Generous financial and intellectual support has come from the David Library of the American Revolution, the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and Public Policy, the Virginia Historical Society, and the Graduate School of the University of Wisconsin–Madison. The author gratefully acknowledges the insightful comments of Andy Ambrose and Ann J. Lane, who critiqued a shorter version of this essay at the Sixth Southern Conference on Women's History. In numerous ways, Angela Boswell and Judith McArthur have been helpful and understanding editors.

So began Jane Charlotte Washington's tenure as the owner of Mount Vernon—a private family estate to which the American public also laid claim.<sup>1</sup>

Although scarcely remembered today, Jane C. Washington was instrumental in preserving the most important site associated with the life and accomplishments of George Washington, at a time that predates the development of a historic preservation movement in the United States. In addition, and better than the family members who preceded and followed her as owner, she appreciated and worked to accommodate intense public attachment to the most hallowed ground in antebellum America. All the while, she cherished her family life and devoted herself to her children's welfare. This essay explores Jane Washington's complicated, sometimes conflicted, life as nineteenth-century woman and mistress of Mount Vernon, a life during which she negotiated and sought to balance her commitment to both eighteenth-century ideals of civic virtue and nineteenth-century ideals of female domesticity.

The estate's new owner possessed an enviable Virginia pedigree. Her paternal great-grandfather, Richard Blackburn, had emigrated from England in the 1720s and established Rippon Lodge on the Potomac River, in Prince William County. Born Jane Charlotte Blackburn in 1786, she grew up at the Lodge in an extended family that included her grandfather Col. Thomas Blackburn, who had fought in the Revolution, and her own father, Richard Scott Blackburn, a United States Army officer and, briefly, a member of the Virginia legislature. In Richard's generation the family intermarried with the Washingtons. That is, Richard's wife (Jane's mother) belonged to the Ball family, while his sister married Bushrod Washington, the early Supreme Court justice and a nephew of George Washington. In Jane's generation, kinship ties grew closer. Both she and a sister married Washington brothers. The men's paternal grandfather was a brother of the nation's first president. Their maternal grandfather was Richard Henry Lee, the Revolutionary leader and signer of the Declaration of Independence.<sup>2</sup>

1. George Washington Ball, "Skeleton of Manuscript," n.d., Ball Family Papers, 1716–1983, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond. See also the letter of a congressman who belonged to the offending entourage: Thomas F. Foster to George C. Washington, June 26, 1832, Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union, MVLA.

2. Louisa D. F. Hogue, "The History of the Blackburn Family," *Prince William Reliquary* 2 (Jan. 2003): 1–8; Richard Blackburn Black, "Rippon Lodge," *Historical Society of Fairfax County Bulletin* 9 (1964–1965): 23–29; Donald Jackson and Dorothy Twohig, eds., *The Diaries of George Washington* 6 vols. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976–1979) 6:253–54, 357; John W. Wayland, *The Washingtons and Their Homes* (Staunton, VA: Press of McClure Printing, 1944), 223; George H. S. King, "Notes and Identifications," *Northern Neck of Virginia Historical Magazine* 25 (Dec. 1975): 2768.

After Jane Charlotte Blackburn married John Augustine Washington at Rippon Lodge in 1811, she moved from the Potomac tidewater to the more rugged terrain of Jefferson County, about sixty-five miles to the northwest. In this area George Washington had surveyed the Fairfax land grant during the 1750s, acquired vast acreage for himself, and eventually divided it among his heirs. Therefore, by the time the newly married couple set up housekeeping in the county, estates owned by various Washington kin dotted the nearby landscape. Also part of the couple's local network were Blackburn relatives who had relocated from the tidewater to Jefferson County. In this setting, only miles from where the Shenandoah River flows into the Potomac, John Augustine Washington supervised the building of Blakeley, which Jane would always regard as home.<sup>3</sup>

What little evidence survives about life at Blakeley through the 1820s suggests activities and interests typical of Virginia's landed elite at that time. Jane, who impressed people as a congenial, "very fine woman," bore at least seven children, two of whom died in childhood. A traveler found her particularly interested in education. Her "judicious remarks," the traveler reported, "clearly [showed] that education,—for she spoke of her children,—had been a subject of long consideration in her mind." For his part, John Augustine, characterized as an "excellent man," devoted himself to agricultural pursuits with the aid of a sizable enslaved labor force. The couple also practiced Protestant Christian piety.<sup>4</sup>

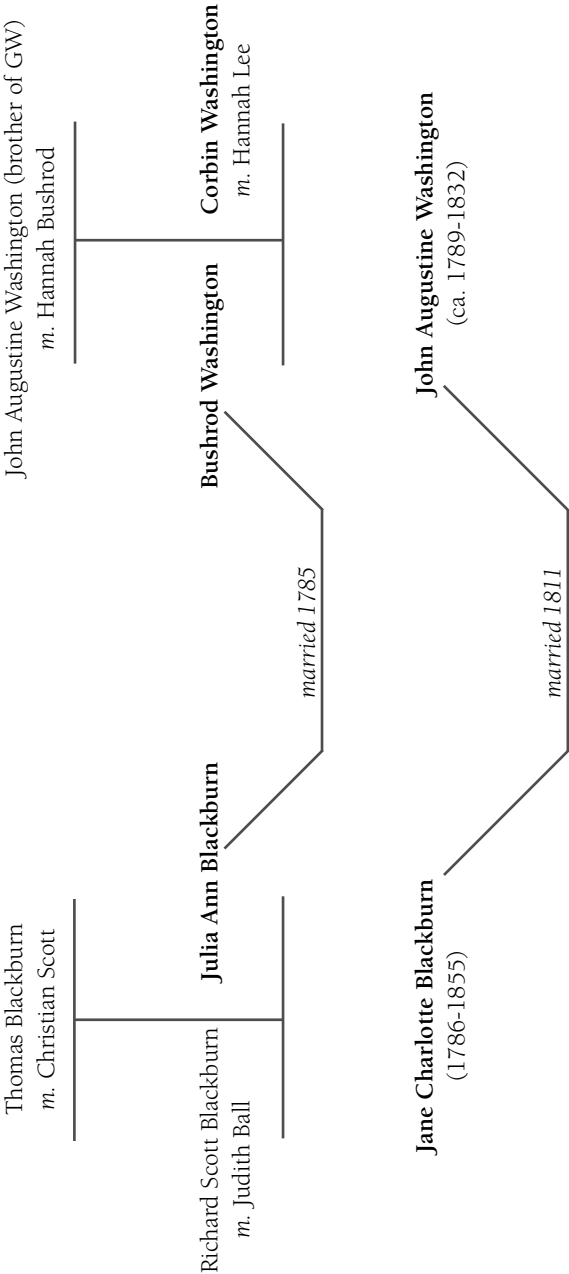
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John Augustine Washington (1789–1832) was named after his grandfather. His mother, Hannah Lee, was the daughter of Richard Henry Lee.

3. Genealogical information in the Washington family Bible, at the George Washington Masonic National Memorial, Alexandria, Virginia; John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Last Will and Testament of George Washington and Schedule of His Property*. . . , 6th ed. (Mount Vernon, VA: Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union, 1992), 24–26, 42; Wayland, *The Washingtons and Their Homes*, 223–25; Jefferson County Historical Society, *Between the Shenandoah and the Potomac: Historic Homes of Jefferson County, West Virginia* (Charles Town, WV: Jefferson County Historical Society, 1990).

4. Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis to Elizabeth Bordley Gibson, Dec. 9, 1829, in *George Washington's Beautiful Nelly: The Letters of Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis to Elizabeth Bordley Gibson, 1794–1851*, ed. Patricia Brady (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 196; Washington family Bible; "Visit to Mount Vernon," *Phenix Gazette* (Alexandria, VA), Jan. 17, 1827; Jane C. Washington to her son John A. Washington, May 3, 1839, MVLA. The children of John Augustine and Jane Charlotte Washington were Anna Maria (1816–1850), George (1818–1827), Christian Scott (1820–1820), John Augustine (1821–1861), Richard Blackburn (1822–1910), Thomas (d. 1854), and another Christian (dates unknown). The 1830 federal census for Jefferson County credited John A. Washington with twenty-five male and seventeen female slaves age ten and above. U.S. Census, Fifth Census, 1830, Population Schedules, Jefferson County, Virginia, fol. 145,

*Blackburn Family Connections to the Washingtons & Lees*



In 1829 their lives became, and thereafter remained, unusually complicated. Through both birth and marriage, they were nephew and niece to Bushrod Washington and his wife, Julia Blackburn Washington. The justice had inherited about four thousand acres of Mount Vernon upon Martha Washington's death in 1802, and there the couple lived for much of each year. When Bushrod and his wife died childless in 1829, John Augustine was named principal heir to the site. He received over twelve hundred acres lying along the Potomac River and encompassing the mansion, its outbuildings and gardens, the family tomb and slave burial ground, cropland, virgin timber, and a fishery site. Between them, John Augustine and Jane Charlotte also inherited most of the personal property at the house, as well as an undetermined number of slaves.<sup>5</sup>

With two large plantations separated by more than a day of travel, the new proprietor and his wife decided that the family would divide its time between Mount Vernon and Blakeley. To a visitor's eye, the mansion and outbuildings at Mount Vernon seemed in good repair, but the soil looked "exhausted." Still, the inheritance was "in good hands," according to kinswoman Eleanor Custis Lewis of nearby Woodlawn plantation, for John Augustine was "very fond of improving grounds." Ill health denied him that pleasure, however, and his brief tenure as owner of the estate was marked by the debilitating sickness that caused his death in 1832.<sup>6</sup>

Jane Washington entered widowhood in a favorable position legally and

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at the National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. On family life in post-Revolutionary Virginia, see Jan Lewis, *The Pursuit of Happiness: Family and Values in Jefferson's Virginia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), and Anya Jabour, *Marriage in the Early Republic: Elizabeth and William Wirt and the Companionate Ideal* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

5. Fitzpatrick, *Last Will and Testament of George Washington*, 19–20; obituaries in the *New-York Spectator*, Dec. 8 and 10, 1829; Bushrod Washington's will and codicil, July 10, 1826, in *Wills of George Washington and His Immediate Ancestors*, ed. Worthington C. Ford (Brooklyn, NY: Historical Printing Club, 1891), 151–64; George Washington's survey map of his farms at Mount Vernon, 1793, *The Papers of George Washington: Retirement Series*, ed. W. W. Abbot et al., 4 vols. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998–1999), 4:460–61; map of the land bequeathed to John A. Washington, n.d., MVLA; Mount Vernon Farm Book [1814–1845], MVLA. As of 1869 considerable "original growth" timber remained on this inheritance. "The Mount Vernon Estate for Sale," *Alexandria (Virginia) Gazette*, June 17, 1869.

6. *Phenix Gazette*, Jan. 17, 1827; Lewis to Gibson, Dec. 9, 1829, in *George Washington's Beautiful Nelly*, 196; J. A. Washington to G. C. Washington, Mar. 4, 1831, MVLA; Lewis to F. P. Butler, Apr. 22, 1832, Butler Family Papers, Williams Research Center, Historic New Orleans Collection, New Orleans, Louisiana.

financially. That is, her husband's entire estate descended to her, subject only to a general provision that she someday divide the inheritance among their children "in any way she may think proper." This bequest, combined with the fact that Jane never remarried, meant that until her own death in 1855 she alone had authority to use and dispose of family assets.<sup>7</sup>

As a woman of means, she made sure that her children were well educated. As a woman of devout piety, she counseled faith, discipline, and morality. Her dedication to these values appears forcefully, to cite only one example, in a letter she wrote to her sixteen-year-old son, also named John Augustine Washington, while he was at boarding school in 1838. Dissatisfied, even a bit exasperated, with John's inattention to his studies, she admonished him,

I much fear the habit you have of loose desultory reading—and the frequent breaks in yr course of Study for the last three years, has been a serious disadvantage to you. It is not however yet too late in life for you to regain all you have lost—provided you commence at once, with a firm determination to pursue every duty and study, on settled & well regulated principles. The consciousness of aiming alone at what is right, & pleasing in the sight of God! and continually looking to Him, for strength to persevere, will carry you thro' every difficulty, or still make you happy & respected, even s[hould] you fail in achieving, what to us *now* seems desirable. Oh, my son, could I be assured that you were training by a course of high, honourable, pure and Holy discipline, for the performance of the duties of life, and the glory of Heaven, I should in the fullness of Maternal joy and humble gratitude to God! forget every past anxiety and care I have felt on your account, or only remember them as additional causes for thanksgiving.

John got the message—eventually. On his twenty-first birthday in 1842, he confessed to his diary that he had given his mother "much trouble & anxiety. . . principally I believe by the heedlessness & impetuosity of youth." That day he promised to atone for past waywardness and to be more responsive to "a fond mother, a sincere christian, a true lady, & a judicious woman."<sup>8</sup>

Entwined with Jane's conceptions of maternal and Christian responsibility was another theme common among nineteenth-century women: benevolence.

7. J. A. Washington's will, Aug. 6, 1822, and codicil, Sept. 10, 1822 (copies), MVLA.

8. Jane C. Washington to Eliza Rankin, Jan. 4, 1833, and to her son John A. Washington (d. 1861), Feb. 23, 1838; entry for May 3, 1842, in John A. Washington diary, 1842–1845, in Mount Vernon Farm Book [1814–1845], all at MVLA. Hereinafter citations to Jane C. Washington will be JCW, and those to her son John will be JAW.

A notable outlet through which she expressed this commitment was the African colonization movement. Following in the footsteps of Bushrod Washington, a founder and president of the American Colonization Society, Jane and other members of the Washington and Blackburn families helped support voyages of freed slaves willing to immigrate to Liberia. In the 1830s she freed some of her own chattel and hoped that, on the long voyage across the Atlantic, they might be converted to Christianity by missionaries on board ship.<sup>9</sup>

Jane Washington's life as mother, Christian, and benefactor would constitute a chapter solely in nineteenth-century family history were it not for her long ownership of Mount Vernon. That virtually forced upon her a civic role and a measure of unsought national prominence. During the 1830s and 1840s she became a pivotal figure in the property's transition from private estate to national icon. Recognizing that hundreds, eventually thousands, of Americans came on pilgrimages each year, she tried to enhance the quality of their experience. Moreover, as popular discourse increasingly insisted that the estate must be made permanently accessible to the American people, she became the first member of the family who signaled, publicly, willingness to transfer the mansion and nearby acreage to the citizenry. That sparked a major petition campaign in 1847 and 1848, during which thousands of people throughout the United States urged Congress to buy the home and tomb of Washington. Although the campaign failed, its primary goal—securing the site for public use—was subsequently achieved by the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association (MVLA). It usually receives credit for creating the model for historic preservation in the United States, but that is an exaggeration, for the association was more imitative than innovative. In the half century between Martha Washington's death and the advent of the MVLA in 1853, interactions between the public and the Washington family had produced not only protocols of visiting but, fundamentally, the conviction that Mount Vernon was so important that it must be preserved as a repository of historic memory and civic

9. Fragment of a JCW letter, n.d., in MVLA, *The Records of Mt. Vernon* (Denver, CO: Carson Harper, 1894), 46; Judith M. Blackburn to Ralph R. Gurley, ca. Sept. 1830 and Mar. 29, 1831, American Colonization Society Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (the author is indebted to Marie Tyler-McGraw for calling the Blackburn letters to her attention). The seminal work on female benevolence is Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990). See also Elizabeth R. Varon, *We Mean to Be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 14–23.

idealism and as a powerful force for national unity. More than any other member of the family, Jane Washington articulated these values.<sup>10</sup>

To appreciate her accomplishments in what became the first national effort to preserve *any* historic site, it is necessary to recognize that Mount Vernon was both hallowed ground and contested ground. Popular rhetoric left no doubt that countless nineteenth-century Americans considered Mount Vernon the *nation's* most sacred place: here was “holy ground,” the “Mecca of the American Mind,” the “Jerusalem of America.” Yet, the reality was more complicated. Most notably, Bushrod Washington’s relationship with the public often grew tense. He clearly favored limited, controlled, ceremonial events in which aging Revolutionary War veterans wept, prominent men delivered orations, and cadets from military schools marched to the tomb and fired their muskets in solemn tribute. In the scheme of things, however, staged ceremonial events were exceptional, and the typical pilgrimage experience far less deferential. In fact, by the 1820s, members of the public asserted claims on property to which Bushrod Washington held clear, unrestricted title. Or so reported a surprised visitor in 1822:

the custom seems to be . . . to go over his grounds and through the house with very little ceremony. The fame of General Washington is the property of the nation, and individuals appear to consider the mansion and lands which formerly belonged to him, so far public property as to entitle them to run through them and round them without regard to the convenience of the present proprietor. Indeed it seems to be reasonable that the possessor of the estate of so illustrious a man should permit any of his Countrymen to examine whatever may awaken recollections of his greatness or afford a glimpse of his private life.<sup>11</sup>

10. This paragraph relies on Jean B. Lee, “Historical Memory, Sectional Strife, and the American Mecca: Mount Vernon, 1783–1853,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 109 (2001): 255–300. Cf. Gerald W. Johnson, *Mount Vernon: The Story of a Shrine*, rev. ed. (Mount Vernon, VA: Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association of the Union, 1991); Judith A. Mitchell, “Ann Pamela Cunningham: ‘A Southern Matron’s’ Legacy” (master’s thesis, Middle Tennessee State University, 1993); James M. Fitch, *Historic Preservation: Curatorial Management of the Built World* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 88–90; Wilbur Zelinsky, *Nation into State: The Shifting Symbolic Foundations of American Nationalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 95–96.

11. Sacrilized language quoted here is in “An Hour at Mount Vernon,” *New-England Magazine* 7 (Nov. 1834): 398; “Mount Vernon,” *Philadelphia Pennsylvanian*, Jan. 18, 1836; and T. A. Miller to JAW, July 12, 1843, MVLA. The long quotation is from Charles H. Ruggles to Sarah C. Ruggles, Apr. 28, 1822, MVLA. For ceremonial visits see “Celebrations



In response, Judge Washington demanded proper decorum—with only limited success. Convinced that *some* people who arrived by steamboat scandalously proceeded to picnic and even dance on the lawn of the mansion, he tried to bar *all* steamboat passengers from the property. Unwilling to admit *any* pilgrims on Sundays, he once threatened to sue a party of congressmen for trespassing because they sought admission on the Sabbath. And when northern visitors with an antislavery agenda reportedly stirred up a “temper” of insubordination among his slaves, Bushrod Washington promptly sold fifty-four men, women, and children to Louisiana planters. His actions attracted press coverage and public condemnation.<sup>12</sup>

One suspects that relations with the public grew less contentious during John Augustine Washington’s tenure only because ill health limited his ability to interact with the public. What the family considered improper behavior persisted nonetheless, as attested by the uninvited party that pushed into the mansion on the day he died. Nor did John Augustine avoid censure, in his case for refusing a request from Congress to transfer the remains of George and Martha Washington to the national capital.<sup>13</sup>

Jane Washington changed course. At a time when American homes were increasingly idolized as private spaces presided over by women, she allowed greater public access to Mount Vernon. She did so because, amid the severe sectional controversies of the 1830s, she saw the site as a unifying force. Acknowledging that “the Nation . . . shares it with us,” she wrote in 1840,

I never would have submitted to the endless intrusions, and sacrifice of every thing like private right and domestic privacy to which we are liable here, but that I believe it arises frequently from a sincere (though thoughtlessly indulged) desire of honouring the memory of Genl. Washington. 'Tis a feeling calculated

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of the 4th of July at Mount Vernon” and “Communication,” *Washington, D.C., National Intelligencer*, July 9, 1823, and May 24, 1827; Edgar E. Brandon, comp. and ed., *Lafayette, Guest of the Nation: A Contemporary Account of the “Triumphal Tour” of General Lafayette through the United States in 1824–1825* 3 vols. (Oxford, OH: Oxford Historical Press, 1950–1957), 3:38–42; “Journal of a Veteran Officer,” *New-York Mirror, A Weekly Journal, Devoted to Literature and the Fine Arts*, Feb. 28, 1835.

12. B. Washington, “NOTICE,” July 4, 1822, n. p. (copy at MVLA), subsequently reprinted in the *Philadelphia National Gazette and Literary Register*, July 20, 1822, and other newspapers; “Tomb of Washington,” *Providence (Rhode Island) Microcosm*, May 26, 1826; “Judge Washington and His Slaves,” *Baltimore Niles’ Weekly Register*, Sept. 1, 1821; “Judge Washington,” *Philadelphia Union*, Sept. 28, 1821.

13. Lee, “Historical Memory, Sectional Strife, and the American Mecca,” 272–75.

to inspire and strengthen virtuous and patriotic principles, and cement more firmly the ties, that bind us together as a Nation.

The fact that Mount Vernon had a female owner during most of the antebellum years lent credibility to its nation-unifying image. Whereas the nineteenth-century male owners could not avoid sectional politics and divisiveness, Jane Washington could and did. This was no small matter because the gravest threat to the estate's public influence was its other, nonpublic function as a plantation worked by slaves. *Because* of her gender, Jane stood apart from the political arena and never provoked public wrath over her slaveholding. Consciously and comfortably, she projected ideals of eighteenth-century republican womanhood and nineteenth-century domesticity. Her persona as devoted mother, benevolent mistress, pious Christian, and apolitical patriot enabled her to foster Mount Vernon's symbolic and highly important unifying mission within an increasingly contentious Republic.<sup>14</sup>

Fully convinced of the site's transcendent importance, Jane Washington oversaw its upkeep, regularized the visiting experience, and worked to ensure the estate's long-term survival. Each agenda presented formidable challenges. First, the matter of upkeep: beyond predictable deterioration of aging buildings and grounds, the property sustained significant damage from the visiting multitudes. According to one shocked visitor, in 1839,

The Mansion is in much the best repair of any [of] the buildings but its noble piazza at the eastern front has already borrowed two natural columns from the forest. . . . Four years ago one of the green houses was destroyed by fire and one quarter of the black walls are still standing to point out to the stranger what has been. . . . The out buildings are all built of brick but they are in a deplorable condition, some that are unoccupied have neither doors or windows but the walls and shattered roof are left to tell the stranger what has

14. JCW to G. C. Washington, May 25, 1840, MVL. The seminal works on republican motherhood and gendered conceptions of citizenship are, respectively, Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), esp. chap. 9; and Ruth R. Bloch, "The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 13 (Autumn 1987): 37–58. Cynthia A. Kierner analyzes southern women's changing roles and status in *Beyond the Household: Women's Place in the Early South, 1700–1835* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), chaps. 4–5. Scholarship on the creation and uses of historic memory and commemoration is vast. One valuable conceptual essay among several is David Lowenthal, "The Timeless Past: Some Anglo-American Historical Preconceptions," *Journal of American History* 75 (Mar. 1989): 1263–80.

been . . . at the back of the garden nothing but weeds were to be seen. . . . The tomb also is [in] a delapidated condition.

While some blamed this situation entirely on the Washington heirs, others candidly acknowledged the harm that visitors caused. People seeking mementos purloined pebbles from walkways, wood from fences, fruit from the garden, and twigs from trees shading the old and new tombs. In addition to carrying away such souvenirs, visitors wreaked further damage. In 1840 a high school student voiced disgust upon discovering names “marked and scratched all over” the summer house. Abandoning her middle-class manners, a New England woman not only added her name to the carvings, she also climbed over a fence meant to keep people away from the deteriorated tomb in which Washington was originally interred. Worse, at the new tomb, which was constructed in the 1830s, a combination of climbing boys and loose mortar sent bricks tumbling off a wall built to protect the sarcophagus.<sup>15</sup>

Jane Washington exercised remarkable restraint in not complaining about visitors’ depredations, but the estate’s vulnerability clearly worried her. “We have done, and shall continue to do all we can to keep the place from intire decay,” she promised in 1840. Still, “it is yearly becoming more expensive and difficult to do so; the buildings all ought to be thoroughly repaired, or they must in a few years go down.” Because she lived much of each year at Blakeley, by the late 1830s she had begun grooming her oldest son, John, to take over management of Mount Vernon; in 1842 she leased it to him, along with twenty-one slaves. In consultation with his mother, John undertook substantial repairs. Reported a Philadelphia newspaper approvingly, “[T]he buildings and lawns are still preserved as nearly as practicable in the state in which they were left by their immortal proprietor.”<sup>16</sup>

When Jane’s thoughts turned to the long-term future of “the most hallowed spot in America’s soul,” she contemplated two possible courses. The first—and clearly her preference—was to “let the place descend to the Name and family of Washington.” Their integrity and “pure patriotism,” she wrote,

15. L. Osgood, “Visit to Mount Vernon, 1839,” MVLA; Robert W. Nelson, “Marked and Scratched All Over,” 1840, forthcoming in *Experiencing Mount Vernon: Eyewitness Accounts, 1784–1865*, comp. and ed. Jean B. Lee (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006); Caroline Wells Healey [Dall], journal entry for June 10, 1843, Caroline Wells Healey Dall Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.

16. Quoted matter is from JCW to G. C. Washington, May 25, 1840; “Mount Vernon,” *Philadelphia Madisonian*, July 1, 1841. On repair work, see JCW to Christian Washington and JAW, June 28, 1837, MVLA. Terms of the lease are summarized in the entry for Sept. 15, 1842, in John A. Washington Diary, 1842–1845.

“must ever make worthy the Inheritance.” In return, she believed, Mount Vernon bestowed upon the family “a Standing in Society, that no other private situation in our country could give.” Family ownership nonetheless entailed a major challenge: the persistent cost of maintaining the property and making it accessible to visitors. Discreetly, therefore, in 1840 she let it be known that she would accept a congressional appropriation, “respectfully tendered, to enable us to keep up the improvements, and meet the expences we are daily subjected to by the publick.” Historic preservation was not yet considered a government responsibility in the United States, and Congress did not approve a subsidy.<sup>17</sup>

Even as Jane Washington hoped for that subsidy, she contemplated an alternative course for securing Mount Vernon’s future: public ownership. Her deceased husband had entertained this idea and, in a codicil to his will, specifically condoned sale to the United States government. His widow tested the viability of that option and, in addition, specified terms under which she was prepared to relinquish the property. Jane did this between 1838, when she learned that a Senate committee was considering a bill authorizing congressional purchase, and 1849, by which time neither public discourse nor the nationwide petitioning campaign had produced results. In the latter year she quietly deeded the estate to her son John and left it to him to settle Mount Vernon’s fate.<sup>18</sup>

During the time when she was in a position to decide its fate, Jane faced three principal questions: Should she sell this extraordinary piece of real estate, which had been in the family since the seventeenth century? If so, what conditions should be attached to the sale? Finally, what price should she ask? She struggled for answers, largely because her public persona as a Washington and the owner of America’s Mecca, on one hand, and her role as mother and widow, on the other, sometimes pointed in opposite directions.

Certainly that was the case with the fundamental question of whether or not to offer Mount Vernon to the federal government, the only potential buyer she would consider. As widow, she felt obliged to honor her husband’s

17. Osgood, “Visit to Mount Vernon, 1839”; JCW to G. C. Washington, May 25, 1840, and to JAW, Mar. 1, 1846, MVLA. On the development of historic preservation, see Charles B. Hosmer Jr., *Presence of the Past: A History of the Preservation Movement in the United States before Williamsburg* (New York: Putnam, 1965).

18. Codicil to the will of J. A. Washington (d. 1832), July 8, 1830 (copy), and JCW to JAW, Jan. 1838, MVLA; deed from JCW to JAW, Sept. 18, 1849, Deed Book O-3, fols. 258–60, Fairfax County Circuit Court Archives, Fairfax, Virginia; Lee, “Historical Memory, Sectional Strife, and the American Mecca,” 287–89.

willingness to see the estate in federal possession. As mother, she tended to believe that selling the property and investing the proceeds in more liquid capital would enlarge her children's inheritances. And as one who lived in the mansion part of each year, she knew well the odd and draining existence associated with visitors' "intrusions." Writing from there in June of 1837, Jane expressed eagerness "not [to] stay a day longer than necessary. I begin to be worn out with the continued number of visitors who daily come down who begin now to consider me one of the *curiosities* attached to the place." After John Washington took over management, and he and his wife began raising a family there in the 1840s, Jane counseled, "I believe a situation more retired from public interest and intrusion, is more fitting for rearing & providing for a family & ensuring domestic privacy & comfort." It is not a little ironic that, at a time when the cult of domesticity extolled the sanctity of the home and when middle-class mores promoted family privacy, Mount Vernon constituted a glaring exception to those social values.<sup>19</sup>

Countering her reasons for selling the site was the Washington family's long history with Mount Vernon. "I am strongly deeply attached to the place," she stated, "and to part with it will cause me much regret." Furthermore, as she emphasized to John, "the social advantages the place confers on the resident Washington family. . . are such as any Individuals, in any Age, or under any Government, would have highly appreciated." No matter what price Mount Vernon might bring, money could never compensate the family for the diminished social standing that loss of the estate would entail.<sup>20</sup>

Arguments in favor of selling nonetheless prevailed, which led to the next issue: what conditions should Jane Washington attach to the transaction? When a group of congressmen and other dignitaries posed that very question in 1846, she offered to sell the mansion and 150 adjacent acres on condition that the federal government never dispose of the property and, should that government someday be dissolved, her descendants would take possession. On this and other occasions she apparently never communicated directly with members of Congress but chose instead to act through male relatives. Widespread publication of her terms of sale in the fall of 1847 coincided with the start of the national petition drive, in which thousands of signatories

19. JCW to C. Washington and JAW, June 28, 1837, to G. C. Washington, May 25, 1840, and to JAW, Jan. 1838, Dec. 13, 1846, MVLA. For Virginians' post-Revolutionary emphasis on domestic privacy, see Lewis, *Pursuit of Happiness*; Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 302–5; and Kierner, *Beyond the Household*, chap. 5.

20. JCW to JAW, Feb. 18, Dec. 13, 1846, MVLA.

asked Congress to buy the site so that Americans could always “enjoy the right and privilege of visiting, unrestrictedly, the venerated grounds, mansion, and sepulchre of Washington.”<sup>21</sup>

Establishing the asking price—the third issue raised by a potential sale—caused Jane Washington considerable anguish. In essence, she served as trustee of Mount Vernon’s power to remind nineteenth-century Americans of Revolutionary-era civic virtues, including self-sacrifice for the common good. George Washington, of course, epitomized that virtue, and Jane followed in his footsteps by opening her property to thousands of people annually. At the same time, she exercised responsibility for her children’s welfare and their estates. And therein lay the quandary, for Mount Vernon’s allure as national icon made it far more valuable than its worth as a twelve-hundred-acre plantation of modest agricultural productivity. Yet how could she both exemplify disinterested female patriotism and bargain over and profit from hallowed ground? She resolved these dilemmas by insisting that Congress approach her with an offer, not the reverse, and by using male relatives (especially her son) as intermediaries. Thus she tried to secure her children’s financial well-being, but not to the extent that her reputation as civic benefactor suffered.<sup>22</sup>

Her son was far less hesitant about trading Mecca for mammon, and that caused her discomfort. In 1838, when John was but sixteen years old, she had little difficulty setting what she considered a fair price: fifty thousand dollars for all of the land, or fifteen thousand dollars if Congress wanted only the mansion and one hundred adjacent acres. In contrast, at the start of the petitioning effort in 1846 she was dismayed when John, now of age and demonstrating strong entrepreneurial inclinations, pushed for a price of a hundred thousand dollars for one hundred fifty acres. In a classic example of

21. “Memorial of Citizens of the United States, Praying the Purchase of Mount Vernon by the Government,” 30th Congress, 1st Session, Senate Document 82, *Miscellaneous Documents Printed by Order of the Senate* . . . (Washington, D.C.: Tappin & Streper, 1848), 1–5; “The Purchase of Mount Vernon,” *New-York Commercial Advertiser*, Oct. 18, 1847; “The Purchase of Mount Vernon,” *New Hampshire Patriot and State Gazette*, Oct. 21, 1847. The original memorials, which were distributed from Washington, D.C., without attribution, are in the records of the House of Representatives, Committee on Military Affairs (HR 30A/G12.4, G17.1), and the Senate, Committee on the District of Columbia (Sen. 30/H4) and Committee on Military Affairs (Sen. 30A/H9), National Archives and Records Administration.

22. “Memorial of Citizens of the United States, Praying the Purchase of Mount Vernon by the Government,” 4; JCW to JAW, Dec. 13, 1846, MVLA. Representative of numerous comments on soil exhaustion at the plantation is “Letters from Mr. Greeley,” *New-York Weekly Tribune*, Apr. 12, 1856.

nineteenth-century female altruism versus male acquisitiveness, Jane confided to him, "As we approach the transaction there is something so repugnant to me in parting with M[ount] V[ernon] for Money, that I seem to recoil from it, as if it were almost sacrilegious. The Sum you mention . . . has ever seemed to me extortionate. . . . I again repeat I had rather leave it to Congress to fix the price."<sup>23</sup>

Congress did not respond positively to the petitioning effort, and the mistress of Mount Vernon grew increasingly doubtful that the national government would ever buy the property. In 1849 she made one last, typically oblique approach to the Senate when she asked her son to "draw up a Memorial" in which she "respectfully Solicits a final answer" as to "whether M[ount] V[ernon] could be sold to the U. S. G[overnment] & on what terms." Then in her early sixties, she considered herself "far advanced in the Vale of years" and needed to settle her affairs. Implicitly or explicitly, the Senate's answer was no, for within a few months she deeded the entire estate to John. Well into the 1850s he continued to explore the possibility of federal ownership, while also opening negotiations with the state of Virginia. At the same time, he raised the price to two hundred thousand dollars for two hundred acres. That, opined his mother, was an "enormous" sum; surely a hundred thousand was "noble" enough.<sup>24</sup>

During the many years that Jane Washington tried to preserve Mount Vernon and secure its long-term welfare, she also sought to bring better order and didactic value to what visitors experienced. Here, in her words, was "a place pure, hallowed, and consecrated to virtue," and she wanted to keep it that way. Beginning during her husband's lifetime, she worked to shape visitations from something that had been completely ad hoc, to what, in retrospect, we recognize as basic rituals still in use at historic house sites in the United States. Those rituals included guided tours meant to inform the public while also preserving vulnerable buildings and grounds and, in addition, maintaining the mansion as a museum filled with relics from George and Martha Washington's tenure. In such ways Jane transformed the visiting experience at the site. Not least, she turned from the contentiousness that had often marked Bushrod Washington's years as owner and embraced the

23. JCW to JAW, Jan. 1838, and Dec. 13, 1846 (quotation); "Documents Relating to the Proposed Purchase of Mount Vernon . . .," [1846–1847], broadside in the Special Collections Department, University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville.

24. JCW to G. C. Washington, May 4, 1848, and to JAW, Mar. 7, 1849, and Mar. 27, 1851, MVLA; deed from JCW to JAW, Sept. 18, 1849. See also Lee, "Historical Memory, Sectional Strife, and the American Mecca," 289–93, for Congress's inability to effect a sale.

first president's sentiments, as he had expressed them in 1794: "I have no objection to any sober or orderly person's gratifying their curiosity in viewing the buildings, Gardens &c. about Mount Vernon."<sup>25</sup>

Concerned lest the estate be overrun with so many people that an atmosphere of remembrance and veneration might be ruined, she controlled access. Namely, she refused to allow excursion steamboats, capable of carrying more than a hundred people at a time, to unload passengers at her Potomac River wharf. She feared not only the press of so many people, but also that "low idlers" might be among them. Pilgrims to Mount Vernon in the 1830s and 1840s, therefore, were admitted after an overland trip that was not for the fainthearted. "The road to Mt. Vernon is shockingly bad," complained one woman; "we were continually jolted and thrown against each other." An exasperated male passenger pronounced the road "about the worst I ever travelled—deep mud—deeper holes—hills & ravines—streams without bridges and 'corduroy' causeways . . . the Carriage was almost [tipped] over several times." Upon entering the estate, travelers found its road so rough that they had to abandon their conveyances and walk about a half mile to the mansion. Some objected strenuously. Others recognized that protecting the site in this way, keeping horses and carriages at a distance, made for quieter, more meaningful pilgrimages.<sup>26</sup>

Owing to the "constant and great" crush of visitors, Jane maintained two different protocols for touring the estate. The vast majority of people saw only outdoor Mount Vernon; they never entered the house. Rather, they strolled the grounds with assistance from African Americans, mostly slaves, who lived there. Typically either very young or old, these blacks directed people where to go, sold fruit and buttermilk, cut down souvenir timber, and—most important—talked. Visitors' writings reveal great interest in blacks who professed some link, however vague, to the hero of the Revolution. Hence, an old woman "tottered" to a gate and admitted new arrivals; if asked, she claimed to have been "in the family" while Washington was alive. Having witnessed this encounter, one man felt "grateful to find one link, though

25. JCW to JAW, Mar. 3, 1842, MVLA; GW to William Pearce, Nov. 23, 1794, in *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745–1799*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick, 39 vols. (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1931–1944), 34:42.

26. JCW to JAW, Mar. 3, 1842; Healey [Dall], journal entry for June 10, 1843; Benjamin S. Rotch to his wife, Feb. 21, 1848, MVLA; "Mount Vernon," *Harrisburg (Pennsylvania) Democratic Union*, Nov. 27, 1844; Samuel I. Prime, "A Pilgrimage to the Tomb of Washington," *New-York Observer*, June 27, 1846.



such an one, between the illustrious dead and the living.” A better (or at least more vocal) link to the past was Phil the gardener, who claimed to have seen the living Washington and who readily shared reminiscences. Other African Americans escorted visitors over the grounds while pointing out and explaining associations with him. On this outdoor tour, nothing surpassed the time spent at the tomb. There, one entranced pilgrim mused, “no ordinary thoughts can enter”; “sacred calm” quieted every passion, so that “we may imbibe an essence of that heaven-born patriotism which so endears the spirit we reverence.”<sup>27</sup>

Relatively few people also toured the mansion. In order both to protect the building and maintain some semblance of family privacy, Jane Washington insisted that only those who presented suitable letters of recommendation could enter. That still amounted to a lot of people, however. For example, in a period of about two and a half hours, an observer counted six separate groups being admitted to the house. In most cases an African American ushered in the strangers and led them through downstairs rooms. Occasionally Jane herself served as tour guide.<sup>28</sup>

Among numerous surviving visitors’ accounts, one of the most revealing was written by a clergyman named Samuel I. Prime and published in the *New-York Observer* in 1846. His account is particularly valuable because it demonstrates that a significant portion of the house was already a museum. Furthermore, the Reverend Prime’s visit occurred shortly before the national petition drive got under way, and clearly he listened carefully to and subsequently repeated Jane’s views about the condition and fate of Mount Vernon.<sup>29</sup>

Upon entering the mansion, Prime and his party were taken to the library, where Jane Washington greeted them cordially and then proceeded to conduct them “from room to room, while with earnest but gentle dignity she pointed out the various memorials of the man which were constantly meeting the eye.” George Washington’s library was the perfect place to begin the

27. Prime, “A Pilgrimage to the Tomb of Washington”; Nelson, “Marked and Scratched All Over”; Healey [Dall], journal entry for June 10, 1843; Benjamin Brown French, *Witness to the Young Republic: A Yankee’s Journal, 1828–1870*, ed. Donald B. Cole and John J. McDonough (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1989), 42–43; “Mount Vernon,” *Harrisburg (Pennsylvania) Democratic Union*, Nov. 27, 1844.

28. Prime, “A Pilgrimage to the Tomb of Washington”; Dolley Madison to JCW, May 4, 1844, MVLA; Mrs. C., “A Visit to Mount Vernon,” *Washington, D.C., Daily National Intelligencer*, June 14, 1850; “Mount Vernon,” *Family Magazine* 4 (1836): 382–84; B. Rotch to his wife, Feb. 21, 1848, MVLA.

29. Prime, “A Pilgrimage to the Tomb of Washington.”

tour, for it appeared “preserved as nearly as possible in the state in which he left it” and contained his books, including the family Bible, the famous Houdon bust, and other “memorials of the great man.” Toward the end of the tour, the group entered the large Palladian dining room to receive refreshments, “an honour which we appreciated the more highly as it was offered in the very room in which Washington had so often presided at his own social board.”<sup>30</sup>

By publishing his account in a New York newspaper, Prime conveyed to a large audience, without attribution, his “venerable,” “simple but elegant” hostess’s views. Namely, “the Government ought to become the proprietor of these acres. The incessant and increasing stream of strangers renders it undesirable as a place of private residence, but its gates ought never to be closed against the pilgrims who travel hither to see where Washington lived and died and is buried.”<sup>31</sup>

When Prime met Jane Charlotte Washington in 1846, he thought her “venerable in years” and “feeble” in health. She lived long enough to know with near certainty that, notwithstanding popular pressure, the federal government would not purchase Mount Vernon. Therefore she remained determined that she and her family must continue sharing the nation’s most sacred place with the public. After deeding the estate to her eldest son in 1849, she spent less time at the place that both benefited and burdened her. She died at Blakeley, her home in Jefferson County, Virginia, on September 6, 1855. Her anguished son John and other members of the family accompanied her body back to Mount Vernon and interred it near her husband’s. That is what she wanted. In his memory, she had “no equal . . . among the whole circle of my acquaintance.”<sup>32</sup>

Scholarship on the origins of historic preservation in the United States typically begins with Mount Vernon—the Mount Vernon of Ann Pamela Cunningham and the Ladies’ Association, not of Jane Charlotte Washington. Reading that literature, one might easily conclude that nothing of importance happened at the estate between George Washington’s death in 1799 and Cunningham’s appeal in 1853 to southern women to save Mount Vernon for the nation. Yet, as I have argued at length elsewhere, between 1799 and the 1850s, countless Americans not only venerated the place most closely identified with the preeminent hero of the Revolution, they also insisted upon tangible

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*; “Died,” *Alexandria Gazette and Virginia Advertiser*, Sept. 10, 1855; entry for May 3, 1842, John A. Washington Diary, 1842–1845.

access to what was still a private estate. Over these decades they and a succession of Washington owners gradually worked out a mutually tolerable relationship.<sup>33</sup>

In this, Jane Washington played the pivotal role. She accorded legitimacy to people's insistence upon access, in ways that her predecessors had not. Furthermore, once she let it be known that she was prepared to sell some or all of the property to the federal government, there was no turning back. Public discourse thereafter advocated public ownership. During her long tenure as owner, Jane Washington practiced and projected Revolutionary-era civic virtues. She placed the site's civic and didactic value well ahead of what it could command in the marketplace. She permitted and endured, without complaint, what must have been incredible intrusions on her privacy. Because she appreciated Mount Vernon's remarkable hold on the public imagination and also understood its capacity to foster attachment to the nation, she felt duty-bound to do what she could to offer people an informative, memorable visiting experience, one in harmony with her exalted vision of the site. By enabling tens of thousands actually to see the American Mecca, Jane enabled them to take back to their towns and farms strong impressions of the toll inflicted by time and traffic—and the conviction that something must be done to preserve the site.

The fate of Mount Vernon might well have been different but for her stewardship. Although unable fully to protect it against human and natural destructive elements, she sought to maintain the estate so that it appeared essentially as it had in George Washington's lifetime, and here, too, she contributed to the foundations of the historic preservation movement in the United States. Within her own family, she tempered the entrepreneurial proclivities of her son John, heir to the property and the man who later sold it to the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association. If his mother projected eighteenth-century civic virtues, John's public persona was that of nineteenth-century acquisitive male; witness his high asking price, which he eventually received. In addition, there is evidence that on several occasions he entertained the possibility of selling Mount Vernon to private individuals or a group of

33. A Southern Matron [Ann Pamela Cunningham], "To the Ladies of the South," *Charleston (South Carolina) Mercury*, Dec. 2, 1853; Johnson, *Mount Vernon: The Story of a Shrine*, 1, chap. 1; Mitchell, "Ann Pamela Cunningham"; Barbara J. Howe, "Women in Historic Preservation: The Legacy of Ann Pamela Cunningham," *Public Historian* (Winter 1990): 31–61; Patricia West, *Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America's House Museums* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999), chap. 1; Lee, "Historical Memory, Sectional Strife, and the American Mecca," 255–300.

investors—mercenary capitalists, critics called them. That he drew back on these occasions was owing, to a significant extent, to his mother's example and influence. Indeed, when his efforts to sell the property to the national government or, that failing, the state of Virginia, came to naught, he agreed to place Mount Vernon in the hands of the association, the private organization whose core vision and sense of importance of the site most closely reflected Jane Washington's views and commitments. John therein fulfilled the promise, confided to his diary in 1842, to be responsive to the wishes of "a fond mother, a sincere christian, a true lady, & a judicious woman."<sup>34</sup>

34. Lee, "Historical Memory, Sectional Strife, and the American Mecca," 290–91; entry for May 3, 1842, John A. Washington Diary, 1842–1845. See also Fitch, *Historic Preservation*, and Hosmer, *Presence of the Past*.

## “I Desire to Give My Black Family Their Freedom”

### Manumissions, Inheritance, and Visions of Family in Antebellum Kentucky

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*Yvonne M. Pitts*

In 1858 Jane Miller of Trigg County, Kentucky, died possessed of an estate in enslaved persons valued at over sixteen thousand dollars.<sup>1</sup> When her brother Isaac discovered that she had destroyed her property value and his inheritance by emancipating her slaves, he sued to void her will. Isaac Miller claimed that his sister had lacked the mental capacity needed to write a valid will and that her slaves unduly influenced her to free them. Two Trigg County juries agreed with Isaac: Jane Miller was indeed insane. They based their conclusions on testimony from witnesses who noted her “remarkable aversion to male society” and her self-imposed isolation from the white community, choosing to live instead near her slaves. In 1864 the Kentucky Court of Appeals, the state’s highest court, disagreed with Trigg County residents and upheld Jane Miller’s will. For the plaintiffs in the case, a slave named Sarah and her family, the victory was pyrrhic. They had spent six years after Jane Miller’s death in slavery.<sup>2</sup>

I would like to thank Linda K. Kerber, Leslie Schwalm, Sandra F. VanBurkleo, Angela Boswell, and the anonymous readers of this volume for their insightful comments.

1. “Appraisement of Jane Miller’s Estate,” Trigg County Will Book E (1855–1861), Trigg County Court Records, Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives (hereinafter KDLA).

2. “Testimony of William H. Miller,” Transcript of *Sarah v. Miller* (1864), box 3, case 74, Kentucky Court of Appeals Records (hereinafter KCAR), KDLA; *Sarah v. Miller*, 62 Ky. 259 (1864).

This trial forced the courts, the juries, and the witnesses to elucidate their understandings of familial obligations and sanity. *Sarah v. Miller* (1864) and cases like it compelled courts and communities to balance the violation of individual testators' property rights against threats of social chaos and racial disorder brought about by unconventional wills. In several contested wills testators freed slaves or recognized concubines while disregarding legitimate sons, daughters, and relatives. In *Denton v. Franklin* (1848), for example, Edmund Talbot left much of his estate to Hannah, his African American mistress, freed his slaves, and largely excluded his legitimate white children as beneficiaries.<sup>3</sup> When testators emancipated slaves or made bequests to African American beneficiaries, they converted enslaved people from property to personhood and legally recognized slave humanity, sometimes at the exclusion of white kin. With testamentary freedom (allowing testators to choose beneficiaries) came the risk of testators potentially subverting racial and gender hierarchies by recognizing obligations or affections that existed outside the borders of social custom and legality. An examination of Kentucky Court of Appeals case files and county court records from 1822 to 1865 shows how some southern communities attempted to check this potentially subversive use of testamentary freedom by challenging the sanity of testators who chose beneficiaries outside of bloodlines, racial group, or legitimacy. Conversely, as testators' beneficiaries defended their right to inherit, they affirmed alternative visions of families and struggled for recognition of legally unsanctioned, socially disdained relationships.

As numerous scholars have demonstrated, southern social structure rested on maintaining a status-based patriarchal and racial order within households and by affirming the naturalness of the master/slave relationship. Historian Peter Bardaglio believes that the household "not only constituted the chief vehicle for the exercise of power in southern society but also served as the foundation of southern public beliefs and values." When testators ignored those values by distributing property outside of race and kin groups, legal historian Mark Tushnet argues, they disturbed "harmonious social relations."<sup>4</sup> Challenging wills on mental incapacity grounds offered an opportunity to

3. *Denton v. Franklin*, 48 Ky. 28 (1848).

4. See Adrienne D. Davis, "The Private Law of Race and Sex: An Antebellum Perspective," *Stanford Law Review* 51 (Jan. 1999): 221–88; Peter Bardaglio, *Reconstructing the Household: Families, Sex and the Law in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), xi; and Mark V. Tushnet, *The American Law of Slavery, 1810–1860: Considerations of Humanity and Interest* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 188.

reestablish harmonious social relations. By disputing the sanity of testators who challenged these social relations through their devises, juries and communities attempted to strip aberrant testators of rationality. This allowed anomalous devises to be explained away and supported traditional patterns of testation as the workings of a rational mind. The regulation and contestation of testamentary devises provides insight into how communities debated the meanings of family, inheritance, and sanity.

When relatives attempted to overturn wills through charges of insanity or undue influence, they frequently used gendered language to describe testators' and intended beneficiaries' behavior and morality. For instance, the contestants to the Miller will cited Jane Miller's "remarkable aversion" to men. Avoiding men constituted noticeable and deviant behavior within the rubric of Trigg County gender relations. The meanings of sanity and insanity differed for men and women according to how people understood the gendered constellations of moral and appropriate behavior associated with each sex and race.

Likewise, the gendered behavioral ideals shaped how the community judged the worthiness of the chosen beneficiary, particularly when disinherited bloodline family seemed worthy. Witnesses often cast gendered aspersions on the characters of African American beneficiaries, emphasizing their deviation from the ideal of the well-behaved male or female slave. In *Minor's Heirs v. Thomas* (1851) Jeremiah Minor almost completely disinherited his legitimate white children, leaving his estate to his "black family." One witness testified that Minor's "negro woman Fan had complete control over him and could make him do any thing she pleased."<sup>5</sup> The testimony conjured up images of gender and racial disorder. Fan inverted the master/slave relationship. The description portrayed a usurpation of Minor's masculine authority and highlighted the disobedient, potentially dangerous behavior of a female slave. Disinheriting a deserving family member in favor of a beneficiary whom witnesses considered licentious surely indicated insanity. Focusing on gender-appropriate behavior allowed juries and testifying witnesses to condemn testators' or beneficiaries' behavior by using ideals that, while not practiced by everyone, were sanctioned through law and dominant social values. Such testimony established the parameters of sanity and reinforced gender-appropriate

5. "Will of Jeremiah Minor," *Thomas and c. of color v. Jeremiah Minor's Heirs and c.* (1849), Scott County Court Order Book 20, 164; "Testimony of Thomas Catlett," *Thomas and c. of color v. Jeremiah Minor's Heirs and c.* (1849), Scott County Court Order Book 21, 104. Both in Scott County Court Records, KDLA.

behavior and proper family relationships within the crucial institution of the household.

*Denton v. Franklin* (1848), *Minor's Heirs v. Thomas* (1851), and *Sarah v. Miller* (1864) are three in a long line of Kentucky cases in which relatives contested wills on the grounds that the testators were insane (testamentary capacity cases). These cases raised broader issues involving the legal and communal regulation of the process through which the household was culturally and materially reproduced. White testators who transmitted property and slaves to bloodline relatives ensured that the status, wealth, and material foundations of white families would support the next generation. They reinforced the naturalness of African American slavery and white mastery by promising that slaves and their offspring would pass seamlessly as property to future generations.

According to political philosophers, the right to will property accompanied a host of other property rights that were central to the defense of individual liberty and the creation of an independent, self-reliant citizenry. Although many property-holders died intestate, those who wrote wills frequently redistributed large quantities of wealth. One study estimates that during the late nineteenth century wills dictated distribution of 62 percent of all personal wealth in one Pennsylvania county.<sup>6</sup> Testators allocated power and status by passing property, including slaves in southern counties, to beneficiaries. Wills transmitted much more than wealth; they gave material effect to affectionate relationships. They identified chosen beneficiaries, rewarded favorites, and chastised others by expressing the testator's feelings and obligations through the quantity and quality of gifts. Moreover, these transfers ensured the passage of social and economic status from one generation to another. Ultimately, wills, by translating affection and obligation into property, blurred distinctions between the ostensibly private relationships and the public economy.

Coverture, inheritance law, and the exclusion of women from many forms of commerce placed control and transmission of wealth primarily in male hands. Until 1852 when Kentucky's legislature began the slow process of granting married women testamentary rights, most wives had been denied the right to will property due to their status under the legal doctrine of coverture, which transferred most property rights to husbands during marriage. If a husband died first, his wife's control over the estate remained limited. The

6. See James W. Ely Jr., *The Guardian of Every Other Right: A Constitutional History of Property Rights*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 3; and Carole Shammas, Marylynn Salmon, and Michel Dahlin, *Inheritance in America from Colonial Times to the Present* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 15–17.



husband could determine property distribution through his will regardless of his wife's wishes. Kentucky legislators prevented a husband from leaving his wife completely bereft by guaranteeing her dower, or one-third of the estate, for life use. Dower laws were designed not to grant widows financial independence but to prevent impoverished wives from becoming wards of the state. Husbands could will dower land after their wives' deaths; widows had control of the dower estate only for their maintenance and could not will, convey, or radically alter it.<sup>7</sup>

Still, female testators were an important minority. In a random sample of 134 wills from Harrison County, Kentucky, written between 1818 and 1864, sixteen wills (8.4 percent) were written by female testators.<sup>8</sup> Some of the women, like Jane Miller, had never married; others had received absolute control over land in their husbands' wills. A few women with significant property created "separate estates" before marriage that left control in their hands. The Kentucky Court of Appeals, however, believed it unsafe to grant testamentary rights to married women, comparing the risk to that of allowing mentally unsound people to make wills. In *Shropshire v. Reno* (1830), the court contended that "*Femes covert* [married women], minors under prescribed ages, persons of unsound minds, are not, therefore, permitted to make wills, because it is deemed safer that the property of such persons should be distributed by the law, than by any ostensible act of themselves."<sup>9</sup> Although the Court of Appeals did not elaborate on the nature of the danger, it jealously guarded a husband's right to devise all property within the marital estate. Unless women made other legal arrangements before marriage, this jurisprudence almost guaranteed that husbands would determine the distribution of families' material legacy. Inheritance law firmly supported legal patriarchy.

Despite theoretically granting broad freedom to testators to distribute property, the courts and society continued to expect that "the natural objects of the testator's bounty" would inherit. Generally, the perceived naturalness of a relationship hinged on the legal legitimacy of a sexual or biological rela-

7. See Marylynn Salmon, *Women and the Law of Property in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986) for a discussion of the legal rights and disabilities of women during the antebellum period; ch. 106, sec. 4, *Revised Statutes of Kentucky Approved and Adopted by the General Assembly 1851 and 1852 and in Force from July 1852* (Cincinnati: Robert Clarke, 1860).

8. Harrison County Will Books B-H (1818–1864), Harrison County Court Records, KDLA. For an analysis of differing patterns of testation between men and women in Petersburg, Virginia, see Suzanne Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784–1860* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), 133–44.

9. *Shropshire v. Reno*, 28 Ky. 91 (1830).

tionship, such as that between a husband and wife or a testator and his legitimate children. In 1856 the Court of Appeals noted, "If a testator has capacity to understand his obligations to his children, his disregard of such obligations does not render his will invalid . . . although it might prove that he was not in a proper state . . . to dispose of his estate with reason."<sup>10</sup> This system consolidated wealth among family and kin groups and discouraged interracial wealth transfers where socially disdained or illegitimate sexual relationships existed. These legal expectations converged with communal beliefs, creating networks of legal rights and social obligations between generations of white kin.

Often the exercise of testamentary freedom by husbands reinforced their authority within individual households even after their deaths. As fathers, husbands, and masters, men sometimes used their wills to govern the behavior of their children, wives, or slaves by making bequests conditional on their beneficiaries' behavior. William Cox of Trigg County attempted to do all three in his 1855 will. Cox left his wife, Rebeca, control of his real and personal estate during her widowhood. This devise granted only "control" and not full ownership. As long as she remained a widow, she could live on and use the property but could not sell or significantly alter it. At her death, or remarriage, the property would be sold and distributed among his six children. Cox also added a clause concerning his daughter, Rutha, and her choice of a marriage partner, decreeing that if she "marries Nelson More, she is not to have an equal share. I give her Rutha A. Cox five dollars." Even after death William Cox retained authority over his wife and daughter's future marriage decisions. Their financial welfare remained contingent on his authority as father and husband. Such devises reinforced and extended patriarchal power.<sup>11</sup>

Cox's authority as a white master also extended beyond the grave. Perhaps doubting his slaves' obedience or distrusting his wife's disciplinary ability, he mandated that "if any of the negroes belonging to my estate will not obey their mistres she has the rite to sell said negroes."<sup>12</sup> This clause

10. Brian Alan Ross, "Undue Influence and Gender Iniquity," *Women's Rights Law Reporter* 19 (Fall 1997), 102; and *Tudor v. Tudor*, 56 Ky. 383 (1856).

11. "Will of William Cox," Trigg County Will Book E, 28, Trigg County Court Records, KDLA. See Mary Louise Fellows, "Wills and Trusts: The Kingdom of the Fathers," *Law and Inequality: A Journal of Theory and Practice* vol. 10, no. 1 (Dec. 1991): 137–62, for a discussion of how male patriarchal privilege subverts women's legal rights and convinces women that it is in their best interests.

12. "Will of William Cox," Trigg County Court Records, KDLA.

negated the legal default in which the estate, including the slave property, would have remained intact until Rebeca Cox's death or remarriage. The persistent threat of sale served as a warning to the enslaved people on the Cox farm that their community remained precarious and was based on their continued ability to meet Rebeca Cox's expectations. William Cox had granted Rebeca Cox new authority as a white master by allowing her to sell the slaves; in the same document, he had created a powerful disincentive toward remarriage by linking it to a loss of financial security.

Indeed, testamentary freedom represented enormous power over spouses, family, and slaves, but simply writing a will did not guarantee its execution. Family members could, and did, challenge wills. In testamentary capacity cases in which the sanity of the testator was disputed, the beneficiaries named in the will stood as the defendants, and the heirs-at-law (family members who stood to inherit in the absence of a will) were the plaintiffs. After appealing through the highest county court, the losing party could turn to the state level, the appeals court.

This division between local and state courts created tensions between how local communities and the court of appeals enforced testamentary behavior and understood insanity, as when two Trigg County juries overturned Jane Miller's will, but the court of appeals found that "on the subject of capacity the testimony is, both numerically and morally, overwhelming in favor of a disposing mind."<sup>13</sup> Long-nurtured hostility or goodwill toward testators, anger that the deceased had violated local social practices, or sympathy with or dislike of disinherited relatives could sway jurors on the county level, although these reasons did not pass legal muster. The court of appeals, however, had to appear neutral, use established legal tests, and balance testators' property rights against the claims of the heirs-at-law. Its decisions were binding, set precedent, and made case law.

In contested wills involving emancipations, slaves often became litigants defending the will, although Kentucky law prevented them from testifying. Legally prohibited from bringing suits in almost all other instances, a loophole in Kentucky law allowed a slave to bring suit to "establish his right to emancipation" in a case involving a manumission through a will.<sup>14</sup> Some scholars believe that southern appellate courts were sensitive to abolitionists' increasing scrutiny of southern courts that molded theoretically neutral property law to serve the interests of the slaveholding class. Debate persists

13. *Sarah v. Miller*, 62 Ky. 259 (1864).

14. Ch. 43, art. 10, sec 4. *Revised Statutes of Kentucky* (1852, printed 1860).

on whether the execution of law gave slaves some modicum of justice in the southern court system. Some historians argue that the desire to develop a justifiable body of law led judges to maintain the integrity of procedural law through legal formalism. These procedural safeguards granted slaves some protections if their cases reached appellate courts. Others disagree, arguing that harsh restrictions on black civil rights, including prohibitions against slave testimony, illegally recruited juries, and local sentiment cast the legal process as a tool of the ruling class to enforce submission.<sup>15</sup>

While slaves' lives were fraught with the uncertainty of sale at any time, the master's death guaranteed a change in ownership and often a change in residence. Manumitting slaves through wills, while uncommon, occurred more often before 1852, when laws were passed requiring freed slaves to move outside Kentucky borders as a condition of manumission. In a random sample of wills written by Harrison County testators between 1818 and 1864, 8.2 percent included some form of either immediate or conditional manumission. These contentious devises were closely watched by the enslaved people they involved and by deceased testators' white families.<sup>16</sup> Ex-slave James C. Pennington vividly described the apprehension occasioned when slaves passed between generations. "It is very rarely the case that a slave's condition is benefited by passing from the old master into the hands of one of his children," Pennington remarked. "The decline is so rapid and marked . . . that the children of slaveholders are universally inferior . . . mentally, morally, physically, as well as pecuniarily. . . and this is a matter of most vital concern to the slaves." Other slave narratives document how masters' deaths brought profound changes, including the separation of families. Frederick Douglass described the division of his master's estate, recalling how it "sunder[ed] forever the dearest friends, dearest kindred, and strongest ties known to human beings." Many enslaved people also remembered either direct or indirect promises from their masters that their wills would free them. At her

15. Christopher Waldrep, "The Impact of Race Law on Kentucky," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* vol. 90, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 165–182; Mark Tushnet, "The American Law of Slavery, 1810–1860: A Study in the Persistence of Legal Autonomy," *Law and Society Review* vol. 10, no. 1 (1975): 131; Michael Hindus, "Black Justice under White Law: Criminal Prosecutions of Blacks in Antebellum South Carolina," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 63 (1976): 575–99; and Daniel J. Flanigan, "Criminal Procedure in Slave Trials in the Antebellum South," *Journal of Southern History* vol. 40, no. 4 (Nov. 1974): 537–64.

16. Ch. 43, art. 9, sec. 4, *Revised Statutes of Kentucky* (1852, printed 1860). The sample (n = 25%) is taken from Harrison County Will Books B-H (1818–1864), Harrison County Court Records, KDLA.

mistress's death, Harriet Jacobs "could not help having some hopes she had left me free." When the will was read, "we learned that she had bequeathed me to her sister's daughter, a child of five years old. So vanished our hopes."<sup>17</sup>

Slaveowners' wills and popular fiction reveal that owners sometimes kept their promises, as was the case for an emancipated woman identified as "Louise" in former slaveholder-turned-abolitionist Martha Griffith Browne's fictional 1857 autobiography about the slave South. In the novel, the character Louise recalled, "I was sold to James Canfield, a bachelor gentleman in New Orleans and I lived with him, as a wife, for a number of years. . . . At the death of this man I was set free by his will, and three hundred dollars were bequeathed me by him. I had saved a good deal of money during his life-time, and this, with his legacy, made me independent."<sup>18</sup> Similar emancipations, whether fictional or real, at first appear to subvert the institution of slavery and demonstrate the benevolence of some white masters who acknowledged affectionate interracial sexual relationships. These manumissions destroyed slave property and withheld mastery from another white person. Such emancipations explicitly recognized slave humanity by transforming slaves from chattel to legal personhood. These testators acknowledged that enslaved people desired freedom over slavery. To conclude, however, that testators who manumitted slaves intentionally struck a blow against the power of white patriarchy overlooks the timing of these devises and the coercive power relations inherent in sexual relationships between white masters and enslaved women.

Browne portrayed the sexual relationship between Canfield and Louise as central to her emancipation. Although Browne described Louise as a "wife," Louise would have lacked even the limited legal protections, such as dower and divorce rights, that the law granted white wives. Interracial relationships existed in a legal universe that highlighted the near-absolute power of white masters who were deemed sane. Men who waited until their deaths to emancipate enslaved concubines reinforced the politics of coercion and submission between master and slave. Legal scholar Adrienne Davis argues that

17. James C. Pennington, "The Fugitive Blacksmith; or Events in the History of James C. Pennington," in *I was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives, 1849–1866*, ed. Yuval Taylor (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 2:148; Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 1995), 27; Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, in *I Was Born a Slave*, 546.

18. Martha Griffith Browne, *Autobiography of a Female Slave* (New York: Redfield, 1857), 310, "Documenting Southern History Website" <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/browne/browne.html>>

enslaved concubines' "future was contingent on their continuing to please the men who enslaved them, and was defined by them daily."<sup>19</sup> The relationship between enslaved women and white masters turned on how the legal categories defining race, status, and sexuality mutually constituted personhood in a legal system that denied enslaved women ownership of their bodies. By referring to Louise as a "wife," Browne suggests that Louise did not overtly or consistently resist Canfield's sexual advances, yet Louise's status as slave meant that she had no legal right to deny him sexual access to her body. Although husbands had a property right in their wives' bodies, white wives had some legal recourse to divorce, separation, or support and protection from family and friends. Testators were free to destroy their property rights by emancipating enslaved concubines at any time during their lives. Often they chose to remain in coercive relationships in which they had almost absolute legal control until death. These kinds of manumissions simultaneously reinforced and disturbed the sexual and racial hierarchies in the South by recognizing affectionate and sexual interracial unions while maintaining coercion and enforced obedience through enslavement.

Although her meaning was not entirely clear, Browne alluded to the coercive nature of these relationships when Louise described her pre-emancipation life, "In activity I stifle memory, and for awhile I am happy, or, at least, tranquil."<sup>20</sup> Her remark reflects the Faustian bargains manumitted concubines struck while their masters lived. Browne portrays Louise as unhappy as a slave and as Canfield's mistress. She would rather forget the years spent enslaved and with Canfield. During her enslavement, Louise behaved in such a way that maintained Canfield's commitment to emancipate her. Her story reveals agency and the difficult choices made by enslaved women as they negotiated unequal power relations with their masters.

Testators and their family members recognized the contentious and uncertain nature of manumissions in wills. As testator Jane Miller's brother commented in a letter discussing her intended manumissions, "I well know the great difficulty that had attended the carrying out of all such wills trammelled by law suits . . . it amounts to a failure or very annoying detentions."<sup>21</sup> In white families, testators who manumitted slaves rather than passing them to the next generation rejected legitimate bloodline kin. Perhaps a more inexcusable outcome for the slaveholding class, manumissions represented a

19. Davis, "The Private Law of Race and Sex," 267.

20. Browne, *Autobiography of a Female Slave*, 310.

21. Letter inserted in "Testimony of James Miller," transcript of *Sarah v. Miller* (1864), KCAR, KDLA.

devise across color lines. These wills nullified the slaves' value as property and passed the value of each slave to him or herself rather than to the testator's family members—a devise of self-possession to each slave, in other words. Furthermore, these wills violated the white community's patterns of cementing intergenerational bonds forged by passing humans as legal property.<sup>22</sup> If the inheriting of slaves bound white families together, manumissions often led to outright hostility within white families and between the emancipated slaves and the heirs-at-law in the courtroom.

As litigants in testamentary capacity cases, African Americans actively used this body of law to contest their bondage and publicly voice their dissatisfaction with slavery. In Jane Miller's will contest, all twenty-five African Americans who had been her slaves appeared in Trigg County Court and declared their intent to immigrate to Liberia, as required by the will. In doing so, they sent a clear message to the white population of Trigg County: they preferred freedom to bondage even if it meant severe dislocation.<sup>23</sup> Their act explicitly questioned the ideology that promoted the benign nature of slavery. As one of the few areas that allowed slaves active engagement with civil law, this body of jurisprudence marks an unexamined area of enslaved people's struggle for freedom as slaves became legal parties in their quest to move from commodified wealth to personhood.

At a county trial, the plaintiffs attempted to convince a jury (or rarely a panel of judges) that the testator was legally insane and/or unduly influenced by the will's beneficiaries. Often, these charges appeared together, particularly in cases in which testators emancipated slaves or devised property to interracial concubines. A typical challenge alleged that the testator's weakened mental state allowed the black beneficiaries to exert "unnatural" influence over the testator's disposition of property. Most nineteenth-century jurists agreed that testators needed to meet a low standard of mental capacity, which was codified in a simple, three-pronged legal test that has remained almost unchanged to the present. To write a valid will testators were required to have sufficient capacity to comprehend the extent and condition of their property, to recognize the natural objects of their bounty, and to have a fixed purpose in mind when devising their property.<sup>24</sup>

22. Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 101.

23. Transcript, *Sarah v. Miller* (1864), KCAR, KDLA.

24. See *Den v. Vancleve*, 5, New Jersey Supreme Court Papers, 589 (1819). For a Kentucky version of this test, see *In re Reed's Will*, 41 Ky. 79 (1841).

In cases of undue influence, disinherited family members charged one of the testator's beneficiaries with illegally directing the testator toward making "unnatural" bequests. In these cases testators disinherited the "natural object" of their bounty or the heir-at-law in favor of another, usually less socially reputable beneficiary such as a slave, concubine, or wayward relative. Crucial to the notion of undue influence was the legal status of the relationship between the alleged influencer and the testator. Sometimes the influencer had a legally unsanctioned and socially repugnant relationship with the testator, such as an illicit interracial sexual relationship.

Testamentary capacity and undue influence jurisprudence inherently was predisposed to overturn devises to illicit sexual partners because marriage laws prohibited white testators and black partners from legitimizing their relationships through marriage. The Kentucky Court of Appeals tolerated—even expected—persuasion from legitimate or "natural" relations, as they ruled in *Sechrest v. Edwards* (1862). "Lawful influence," Justice Peters held, "such as arises from legitimate or social relations, must be allowed to produce their natural results even upon last wills and testaments." In *The Law of Wills* (1866), oft-cited jurist Isaac Redfield saw the law as maintaining morality by excluding influence emanating from relationships not sanctioned by the law. Redfield believed that influence from legally unsanctioned relationships resulting in inheritance "do[es] violence to the morality of the law . . . if we should apply this rule to unlawful as well as to lawful relations." In this view, heirs-at-law were granted greater latitude when assessing the legality of their influence on the testator's estate decisions; these heirs were expected to reap material benefits from their socially and legally sanctioned relationships. Reinforcing the capacity standard that required testators to recognize the "natural objects" of their bounty, undue influence jurisprudence anticipated that testators would favor their heirs-at-law rather than deny them their material legacy. To do otherwise, if not symptomatic of insanity, indicated a testator susceptible to the illicit seductions of an unworthy and possibly unrelated beneficiary.<sup>25</sup>

In spite of the law's predisposition toward a biologically defined, racially homogenous, and legally endorsed family, the Court of Appeals' early decisions suggested that it would not tolerate lower courts arbitrarily usurping

25. *Sechrest v. Edwards* 61 Ky. 163 (1862), Isaac Redfield, *The Law of Wills, Embracing the Making and Construction of Wills; The Jurisprudence of Insanity; The Effect of Extrinsic Evidence; The Creation and Construction of Trusts, So Far As Applicable to Wills, with Forms and Instructions for Preparing Wills*, part 1, 2nd ed. (Boston: Little Brown and Co, 1866), 466; and Davis, "The Private Law of Race and Sex."



property owners' right to bequeath property. In overturning the Bracken County Court's rejection of Reuben Cochran's will, the appeals court chastised the lower court for impinging on the testator's freedom, remarking that "we cannot think a Court justifiable in arresting the will of a man, and thereby perhaps causing his estate to pass contrary to his own wish and will."<sup>26</sup> Cochran had devised land to his two illegitimate daughters and bequeathed his slaves to his nephew. The court appeared particularly concerned about protecting masculine prerogative and respecting the integrity of a testator's right to exercise free will when transmitting his property. This effort to protect "the will of a man" differed markedly from the court's reasoning in *Shropshire v. Reno* (1830) (decided the same year) in which it was "deemed safer" if the law determined the distribution of married women's property. Indeed, the court believed that most men deserved the benefit of the doubt when choosing their beneficiaries, while women's testamentary independence was viewed with skepticism. Yet cases soon arose that ultimately forced the court to reevaluate this standard.

The Kentucky Court of Appeals heard forty-one challenges to wills written before 1865 on grounds of incapacity or undue influence. Of those cases, twenty-eight (68 percent) involved slave property. Of these twenty-eight cases, fourteen (50 percent) involved wills that either emancipated slaves outright or contained devises for future or conditional emancipation. These statistics demonstrate the centrality of property and importance of maintaining status as a slaveholder among the heirs-at-law of white testators.

By 1822, the Court of Appeals had established its preference for beneficiaries who shared bloodline and race with the testator and its suspicion of testamentary gifts resulting from interracial relationships. George Moore died in 1822, emancipating his black concubine (never named in the record) and devising property to her and several other unrelated beneficiaries. Moore, who had never married, disinherited his brothers. They challenged the will, claiming Moore was "deranged on the subject of his relatives" and that his concubine and other devisees unduly influenced him. The court agreed, ruling that Moore's brothers had become the objects of his "hatred and disgust," and Moore's reasons for his feelings appeared "futile and groundless." To the court, the will itself served as evidence of mental incapacity. They concluded that if Moore had held an unnatural aversion toward unrelated persons rather than those "supposed by the ties of natural affection to be the objects of his bounty, we should have no difficulty in sustaining this will." The court

26. *In re Cochran's Will*, 6 Ky. 491 (1814).

made clear that had Moore devised to his relatives rather than to his concubine, who “possessed considerable influence” over him, his will would have been upheld as reflecting a sound and rational mind. The court equated mental incapacity with testators who devised outside of bloodline kin.<sup>27</sup>

J. Cabell Breckinridge, the lawyer for the beneficiaries, presented an alternative interpretation of Moore’s relationship with his concubine. Breckinridge defended Moore’s right as an independent citizen to pass property to whomever he chose. Breckinridge conceded that an affectionate relationship might have existed at least from the standpoint of Moore’s concubine, noting that she might have been the only “mourner that shed a tear upon his grave.” That did not excuse Moore’s sexual conduct, which Breckinridge agreed was despicable. Breckinridge contended however, that Moore’s interracial relationship was an act “not of madness, but of lust.” Some men, he argued, “seek after the depraved indulgence of their foul and unnatural lusts, in an intercourse with the forbidden sex; or, descending one grade lower in the scale of turpitude, sport their manhood in brutal rivalry with the courser and the boar.”<sup>28</sup> As distasteful as Moore’s conduct was, Breckinridge defended it as within the boundaries of sane, albeit deeply degenerate, behavior. Breckinridge conceded that Moore’s interracial relationship carried the same moral opprobrium as homosexuality and bestiality, but he distinguished it from insanity. His castigation of Moore reinforced dominant ideas about the immorality of interracial relationships, yet held testamentary freedom as a precious right that required protection to ensure the independence of all testators.

The brief presented Moore’s case as a broader need to protect testamentary freedom from encroachment by designing relatives, noting the issue was one of “legal privilege.” Breckinridge insisted that a testator must be allowed to disinherit relatives. He argued that if an “execrable” offense could strip a testator of “the rights of free agency,” then all testators’ independence was at risk. In a statement calculated to resonate with the founding values of the Republic, Breckinridge appealed to the court as “votaries of civil liberty.”<sup>29</sup> Although the Court of Appeals overturned the will, depriving Moore’s concubine of legal personhood, this early dispute illuminates how race and sex infused the definition of legal sanity and the exercise of inheritance rights. The battle being fought was not over the freedom claims of enslaved people.

27. “Reply to Petition for Rehearing, Submitted by Counsel for Appellant,” *Johnson v. Moore’s Heirs*, 11 Ky. 371 (1822).

28. “Reply to Petition,” *Johnson v. Moore’s Heirs*, 11 Ky. 371 (1822).

29. *Ibid.*

Rather, it was over the limits of freedom and independence for testators, who were overwhelmingly white and male, when they crossed racial barriers.

Local communities also made the connection between interracial relationships and insanity. Witness testimony in several cases heard over twenty-five years after *Johnson v. Moore's Heirs* (1822) reveal how people in small Kentucky communities articulated their ideas about the proper relationship between masters and slaves. In two of these cases, *Denton v. Franklin* (1848) and *Minor's Heirs v. Thomas* (1851), when testators publicly recognized interracial relationships as sexual or when the relationships resulted in testamentary gifts, local witnesses expressed disgust and consternation.<sup>30</sup> Their testimonies—usually the bulk of the evidence upon which the jury would rule—indicated that some local men attributed interracial devises and manumissions to an unsound mind. By defining sanity in terms of testators' devises, local men from each testator's community patrolled and reinforced the boundaries of whiteness and family and defined the limits of property rights.

In *Denton v. Franklin* (1848), Edmund Talbot and Hannah, a former slave emancipated by Talbot, had conducted a connubial relationship for many years in Henderson County. Talbot's will emancipated his slaves, devised much of his property to them and Hannah, and left his son and two daughters small devises of land. Similarly, in *Minor's Heirs v. Thomas* (1851), Jeremiah Minor, a Scott County testator, also emancipated his slaves and left them property, referring to them as his "black family." His white children contested the will. In both cases the emancipated slaves participated as legal parties and challenged an inheritance system that usually cast them as chattel rather than legal persons. These wills and the trials that disclosed the relationships behind them suggest that the testators and their African American beneficiaries understood family outside of parameters defined by race and shared blood.<sup>31</sup>

In both cases, lawyers for the heirs-at-law (the testators' disinherited children) contested the wills on grounds of mental incapacity and undue influence. They had to develop a strategy that would allow a finding of insanity and overturn the testators' testamentary freedom while reaffirming generally the property rights that attended white manhood. In both cases the challengers' lawyers used a narrative of mental decline that appears in many testamentary cases. In *Denton v. Franklin* (1848), witnesses testified that in the

30. *Denton v. Franklin*, 48 Ky. 28 (1848), *Minor's Heirs v. Thomas*, 51 Ky. 106 (1851).

31. *Denton v. Franklin*, 48 Ky. 28 (1848); "Will of Edmund Talbot," *Talbott, Thos. D. and others vs. Hardwick, B.F. and others* (Apr. 1847), Henderson County Circuit Court Case Files, Case 7749, KDLA; "Will of Jeremiah Minor," *Thomas v. Minor's Heirs* (1849), 21, p. 106.

years before the will had been written, Edmund Talbot had been “sensible,” and of “sound mind,” but he lost mental capacity as he aged. Hector Green, the county surveyor, compared records that Talbot, a former surveyor, had made years earlier with those he made later; he concluded that, “his business capacity must have been much deranged & impaired in the latter years of his life.” In Jeremiah Minor’s case, his mental decline also was attributed to his advanced age. Martin Bramlett, Minor’s neighbor, testified that until six years prior to his death, Minor was a “moral high minded honorable man,” but during the last few years of his life, Minor lacked the “sense as a common boy of ten years.”<sup>32</sup> This mental deterioration allowed the challengers to explain why the master/slave hierarchy had been inverted. The testators’ progressive retreat from rationality created a debilitated mental state that allowed the slaves to influence their decisions, eventually leading them to disinherit their families. Although this strategy failed when local juries refused to overturn these wills, the Court of Appeals found the testimonies credible enough to set aside the wills and rule in favor of the heirs-at-law in both cases.

Both cases focused on the sexual behavior of the African American beneficiaries. In Edmund Talbot’s case, his interracial sexual relationship became the focal point of the trial. Talbot had been a doctor and a county surveyor and had bought and sold slaves in Henderson County, where he had resided for more than fifteen years before his death. Located in the northwestern part of Kentucky, Henderson County was primarily agricultural and had one of the largest slave populations in the region. The contestants’ lawyers had to prove that this local officeholder, doctor, and businessman was mentally incapable of writing a will. Talbot had roused the ire of the community by violating an unwritten code that allowed white men to pursue relationships with African American women as long as these relationships remained legally and socially unrecognized. The lawyers hoped to convince jurors that their duty was to send a message to the community that while such relationships might be informally tolerated, formal recognition would not be sanctioned.<sup>33</sup>

During the county circuit court trial, witnesses testified that Hannah and Talbot lived as husband and wife. Although Talbot had emancipated Hannah

32. “Testimony of Hector Green,” *Talbott v. Hardwick* (1847), HCCC Case 7749; “Testimony of Martin Bramlett,” *Thomas v. Minor’s Heirs* (1849), 21, p. 102.

33. Transcript, *Talbott v. Hardwick* (1847), HCCC Case 7749; “Reports Communicated to Both Branches of the Legislature of Kentucky at the Dec. Session, 1845 (Auditor’s Report), Legislative Document No. 10” (Frankfort, KY: A. G. Hodges, 1845). For a broader discussion of the ramifications of interracial relationships, see Bardaglio, *Reconstructing the Household*, 48–64.

years before his death, two of Talbot's acquaintances testified that Hannah had acted "unbecoming a servant," and worse, Talbot had not chastised her. Witnesses portrayed Hannah as a duplicitous slave. They refused to admit that perhaps Talbot and Hannah had engaged willingly in an affectionate, companionate relationship that deviated from the subjection of the master/slave relationship, or for that matter, the subordination in the husband/wife relationship. They claimed that as a master, Talbot could not exercise his authority over his dependents, permitting all sorts of social and gender transgressions. John Denton recalled that he heard Hannah "abuse his the doctors sons in law in the Dr's presence & the Dr. said nothing but permitted it." Clearly, Talbot's friends, neighbors, and business associates believed that these instances indicated not only Hannah's powers of persuasion, but also Talbot's weak and disordered mind.<sup>34</sup>

For those who supported slavery and saw the institution as reflecting natural relations ordained by God and law, Talbot could commit no greater sin against his community or posterity. As proslavery theorist and onetime South Carolina senator William Harper noted in a frequently circulated essay,

The licentious passions of men overcome the natural repugnance, and find transient gratification in intercourse with females of the other race. But it is a very different thing from making her . . . the companion of the bosom and hearth. Him . . . we should esteem as a degraded wretch. It is not only in defence of ourselves, of our country and of our own generation, that we refuse to emancipate our slaves, but to defend our posterity and race from degeneracy and degradation.<sup>35</sup>

As Harper suggested, Talbot and Hannah had violated a complex array of racial and gendered codes of behavior that structured social and legal relations in slave states. Hannah had assumed the role of plantation wife by sharing Talbot's bedroom and expressing judgments on the conduct of Talbot's children and their spouses. She occupied a position physically and symbolically reserved for white women. John Dorris, who had lived with Talbot for several years, claimed that Hannah "had influence over him about plantation

34. "Testimony of Joseph B. Norman," Testimony of James Gillis, *Talbott v. Hardwick* (1847), HCCC Case 7749; "Testimony of John Denton," "Testimony of John Dorris," *Talbott v. Hardwick* (1847), HCCC Case 7749. For similar portrayals of interracial relationships by the white witnesses, see Davis, "The Private Law of Race and Sex," 262–65.

35. William Harper, "Slavery in the Light of Social Ethics," in *Cotton is King and Proslavery Arguments* (Augusta: Pritchard, Abbott & Loomis, 1860), 547–626.

affairs & other matters.”<sup>36</sup> Hannah imposed on Talbot’s authority as the male head of household by openly advising him on the masculine world of business affairs. Indeed, the Talbot household appeared chaotic and degenerate. A public finding of insanity would show the community that only a mentally disordered man would allow such transgressions.

The plaintiffs pointed to Hannah as the true culprit, someone who exploited a mentally diminished and isolated man. Implicit in this reasoning was the premise that mastery required a strong, vigilant mind or else dependents would exploit their master’s weakness for their own benefit. It also upheld the mental and moral superiority of white men, as long as they remained “sane,” while highlighting the inherently mendacious nature of black women. Masters perceived as losing mental acuity no longer could claim the privileges and responsibilities of whiteness or mastery, including the right to make decisions involving their property distribution.

Similar tropes emphasizing the cunning nature of African Americans and the consequences of a weak and disordered patriarch emerged in the will dispute over Jeremiah Minor’s will. Although Minor was not accused of conducting sexual relationships with his slaves, witnesses emphasized the slaves’ immoral sexual conduct and Minor’s inability to compel obedience from them. Neighbors marched out a parade of horrors to describe the conditions of the Minor farm, demonstrating the dangers posed by a mentally incapacitated master. John House, a close neighbor, testified that Minor’s negro quarter was a “sink of vice and debauchery.” Worse, he raised the specter of profligate white women prostituting themselves in mixed race liaisons, stating that “they [Minor’s slaves] sold liquor and entertained white women of the basest and most abandoned character notoriously of bad virtue and fame.” As historian Martha Hodes argues, sexual liaisons between white women and black men, unlike those between white masters and female slaves, presented threats to racial slavery and raised the specter of racial degeneration. Because enslaved status was passed through the mother, racial mixing could create a free mulatto underclass. Racial purity depended on protecting white women’s sexual virtue in order to create the next racially pure generation of masters, citizens, and mothers.<sup>37</sup>

36. “Testimony of John Dorris,” *Talbott v. Hardwick* (1847), HCCC Case 7749.

37. “Testimony of John House,” *Thomas v. Minor’s Heirs* (1849), 21, p. 101. Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 4. See Bardaglio, *Reconstructing the Household*, 58–78; Victoria Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 35–42.

Community members linked the reasons for testators' mental decline to a variety of reasons other than old age, including illness or death of a spouse. Often, they attributed the onset of the decline to a time when the testator became isolated from white society and lived almost exclusively with African Americans. In the *Minor* Case, John House testified that after Minor's wife died, "no white person lived with the old man." In *Sarah v. Miller* (1864), female neighbors testified that Jane Miller rarely visited them or participated in Trigg County social rituals. Miller's physician called her a "recluse" who lived "only with her negroes for many years before her death." Deprived of the civilizing influences of white society, these testators slowly went insane and relinquished their authority, and ultimately their property, to their slaves.<sup>38</sup>

In Minor's *Heirs v. Thomas* and *Denton v. Franklin*, local judges and all-male juries upheld the wills in spite of condemnatory testimony. Although numerous witnesses testified that Jeremiah Minor's and Edmund Talbot's mental capacity had declined in recent years, prior to their deaths both testators had enjoyed reputations as respected men who adhered to their roles as businessmen, community leaders, slaveowners, and moral examples in the community. In many respects they had upheld the local gender conventions for men of their class and color.

Historians have pointed to the culture of "personalism" as influencing legal outcomes in local jury trials. Within communities, a person's reputation, developed through years of close contact with neighbors and the community, could influence a jury's decision. Historian Kent Anderson Leslie believes that the culture of personalism partially explains a jury decision upholding David Dickson's will. Dickson, a respected Georgia planter and businessman, left his estate to his illegitimate mixed-race daughter, Amanda Dickson. Leslie argues that Dickson's legendary hospitality and reputation within the community may have fostered goodwill toward him and his daughter among the jurymen and the witnesses.<sup>39</sup>

Personal and business relationships over many years may explain the jury's willingness to overlook Edmund Talbot's and Jeremiah Minor's transgressions. As Thomas B. Catlett noted in the *Minor* will dispute, Jeremiah Minor had been a "man of good conduct" and "industry" who "managed his concerns well." In 1845 Henderson County claimed only 1,509 white men

38. "Testimony of John House," 101, *Thomas v. Minor's Heirs* (1849), 21, p. 101; "Testimony of Dr. Burnett," Transcript of *Sarah v. Miller* (1864) KCAR, KDLA.

39. Kent Anderson Leslie, *Woman of Color, Daughter of Privilege: Amanda America Dickson, 1849–1893* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 30–31.

over twenty-one years old.<sup>40</sup> It is probable that some jurors knew Talbot. The jury may have feared that their behavior might receive the same legal scrutiny. Interfering with male testators' freedom potentially eroded the freedoms and privileges associated with masculinity, perhaps making an all-male jury more hesitant to interfere with the property rights of other local men. When the testator in a will dispute was female, male juries appeared more willing to overturn wills on insanity and undue influence grounds.

In *Sarah v. Miller* (1864), two local juries rejected Jane Miller's will, although numerous witnesses testified to her sanity and intelligence. Even so, Miller deviated from behavior appropriate to her sex and class. Unlike Jeremiah Minor and Edmund Talbot, Jane Miller had never been a typical master or adhered to gender conventions. As a single female who had never married she retained legal rights to her property. Trial transcripts reveal that community members determined the standard of sanity to which Miller would be held by comparing her conduct with that of other women. Miller's neighbor William Martin testified to her mental unsoundness, noting that "her conduct all the time was very strange and different from any other woman I ever knew." Similarly, in testifying in favor of Miller's sanity, Reverend James Hawthorn observed that Miller was a "judicious lady with rather more ordinary shrewdness . . . than is often found in ladies in the same circumstances." By comparing Miller with women believed to be situated similarly, witnesses highlighted her deviations from ordinary female behavior. Even Hawthorn's testimony noted that she had "more ordinary shrewdness" than other women, underscoring how Miller differed from her female counterparts.<sup>41</sup>

Miller's behavior toward men came under scrutiny as well. When asked by the contestants' lawyers if she shunned the company of men, Sheriff Daniel Landes replied that she "always tried to shun me" and referred to her as "very unsocial."<sup>42</sup> The language used to describe Miller's relationships with men emphasized her rejection of them and highlighted Miller's status as an unmarried woman. She thwarted traditional arrangements in which men gained control of women's property through marriage, exercised her right to write a will, and denied her brothers control of her wealth and

40. "Testimony of Thomas B. Catlett," 103, *Thomas v. Minor's Heirs* (1849), 21, p. 103; "Reports Communicated to Both Branches of the Legislature of Kentucky (1845)," 105.

41. "Testimony of William Martin," "Testimony of Rev. James Hawthorn," Transcript of *Sarah v. Miller* (1864), KCAR, KDLA.

42. "Testimony of Daniel Landes," Transcript of *Sarah v. Miller* (1864), 136, KCAR, KDLA.



slaves through her testamentary emancipations. Although many witnesses testified to her sanity, the trial emphasized Miller's behavior as diverging from that of other women, most of whom were married and legally dependent on men. As an unmarried woman who lived in seclusion, rejected social rituals, and avoided contact with men, Jane Miller's behavior pointed to mental incapacity. The jury refused to sanction her independence and her deviance from female gender roles. By nullifying Jane Miller's will, jurors restored her property and mastery over her slaves to its proper place: under male control, in this case that of her brother Isaac, the heir-at-law.

Once *Minor's Heirs v. Thomas* and *Denton v. Franklin* reached the appellate level, the Court of Appeals refused to overlook Edmund Talbot or Jeremiah Minor's transgressions. In both cases, the court shored up white patriarchy by reestablishing racial and sexual order. The court attributed the testators' failures to conform to the cultural and social behaviors of a white patriarchy to insanity. It defined the limits of male testamentary freedom and independence, turning the focus toward not only the beneficiaries of the will, but also the white heirs-at-law who had been disinherited in the process. In *Denton v. Franklin* the court directed its displeasure at Edmund Talbot's concern for Hannah instead of for his children. The court commented that "the gratification of the wishes of this colored woman, seems to be its [the will's] leading object. The natural duty of providing for his own children, whose condition and circumstances in life, required the exercise of his bounty in their favor, was entirely forgotten or disregarded." The court made distinctions based on race about the legitimacy and morality of relationships within the Talbot household, and those judgments determined property rights. Had Hannah and Talbot been able to legally marry, his devises to her probably would have been shielded from allegations of undue influence.<sup>43</sup>

In the dispute over Jeremiah Minor's will, the Court of Appeals reaffirmed its contention that testators would not devise outside of their racial or kin group without provocation. The court ruled that his "children were obedient and affectionate . . . which excludes the inference that his slaves were preferred to them as subjects of his bounty on account of ungrateful or improper conduct."<sup>44</sup> Minor had referred to his slaves in his will as his "black family," suggesting that his relationship with his slaves was affectionate. Minor's will indicated that he saw himself in a masculine role, as a paternal figure to his

43. *Denton v. Franklin*, 48 Ky. 28 (1848); See Hodes, *White Women, Black Men*, 77–86, for a discussion of other instances in which courts sanctioned white men perceived as unable to fulfill the responsibilities of patriarchal authority.

44. *Minor's Heirs v. Thomas*, 51 Ky. 106 (1851).

slaves. The court's rejection of the interracial devises indicated that paternalism, when expressed through inheritance would be confined to blood-related white heirs-at-law. The lines determined by race and blood prevented Minor's slaves from reaping the benefits of his interracial vision of family. Of course, Minor's cryptic reference does not preclude that he demanded subordination from his slaves. For the antebellum Court of Appeals however, legitimately established bloodlines and race were the determining factors in deciding how property and freedom would be distributed.

Once *Sarah v. Miller* (1864) reached the Court of Appeals, the justices strongly supported the will. They opined that "on the subject of capacity the testimony is, both numerically and morally, overwhelming in favor of a disposing mind."<sup>45</sup> The court indicated that, based on the evidence, the lower courts' decisions would not pass statutory requirements for an insanity finding. Although Miller deviated from Trigg County gender roles, she did not pose the threat of sexual disorder and racial chaos brought about by the interracial liaisons described in the *Minor* and *Denton* cases. Miller also banished her freed slaves to Liberia, whereas Talbot's and Minor's emancipations left free African American property owners in local communities. Although Miller never married, her emancipations did not reward slave behavior that impinged on white mastery and masculine authority. Two local juries refused to forgive Jane Miller's eccentric behavior; unlike in the *Minor* and *Denton* decisions, the Court of Appeals found little legal evidence upon which it could endorse local disapproval.

The central issue in these cases is not whether Edmund Talbot, Jeremiah Minor, or Jane Miller were insane by historical legal standards or by contemporary standards. These cases are about how Kentucky courts and communities understood the relationships between family, property distribution, and insanity when wills involved manumissions or devises across racial lines. These cases reveal how people experienced family in configurations different from those sanctioned by law and dominant social ideals. They suggest that some people understood the familial obligations that inhere in private relationships in ways that sometimes threatened the organic hierarchies that structured southern society.

This seemingly neutral body of jurisprudence was deeply invested in maintaining material and affectionate bonds between generations of white families. *Denton v. Franklin*, *Minor's Heirs v. Thomas*, and *Sarah v. Miller* reveal the limits to which the Court of Appeals would sanction the gender and racial

45. *Sarah v. Miller*, 62 Ky. 259 (1864).

politics of local communities. Local communities were willing to uphold Jeremiah Minor's and Edmund Talbot's wills in spite of sexual and social transgressions. In so doing, they reaffirmed white male authority and sexual license. Local juries punished Jane Miller's independence and eccentricity, suggesting that sanity for women depended far more on female adherence to marriage and gender conventions. By overturning the Minor and Talbot wills, the Court of Appeals delineated the boundaries of testamentary freedom and familial obligations. The court refused to let community judgments prevail against images of white patriarchs emasculated by the deprivation of reason and authority. A master who allowed racial disorder and sexual chaos jeopardized the orderly transmission of wealth and the maintenance the slave economy. The court indicated that legally unsanctioned interracial sexual relationships would not be rewarded with material benefits conferred by legitimacy, whiteness, and social acceptance. The racially determined laws of marriage, miscegenation, and legitimacy merged seamlessly with the ostensibly neutral laws of inheritance.

The reasons behind the resolution of Jane Miller's will dispute are more complex. The local trials suggest that juries were much more likely to closely regulate women's property decisions. Writing a will represented the exercise of masculine authority and the recognition of a distinctly masculine obligation of maintaining the family through wealth distribution. Female testators challenged that model by asserting independence over property and creating an alternative model in which women controlled wealth distribution. In spite of numerous witness testimonies affirming Miller's sanity and even her exceptional intelligence, local juries overturned her will. As witness testimony revealed, several community members resented Jane Miller, her independence, and her preference for solitude away from male company. The Court of Appeals however, strongly endorsed her will as reflecting a "self-poised mind, unbiased by any extraneous influence."<sup>46</sup> The court would not allow a precedent-setting ruling based on scant legal evidence to determine the contours of mental capacity. Ruling in 1864, perhaps the court also recognized slavery's imminent demise. Either way, it maintained the appearance of juridical neutrality required for scrutiny by a broader audience.

These cases created a window of opportunity for a few African Americans emancipated by wills. Although in the Minor and Talbot will disputes they ultimately lost, Franklin, Thomas, and the other African American litigants claimed a legal voice through which they rejected their status as property.

46. *Sarah v. Miller*, 62 Ky. 259 (1864).

Sarah and Jane Miller's other slaves ultimately gained their legal freedom. Slaves who brought these emancipation suits actively participated in a legal system that fused skin color to status as property. Ironically, they validated white privilege by struggling to uphold their masters' wills, but in the process, their trials revealed alternative visions of sexual desire, family, and perhaps affection. In the cases that resulted from these relationships and devises, some communities asserted that only an unsound mind would choose such beneficiaries. Heirs-at-law bringing suit, witness testimony, and courts overturning wills preserved the illusion of testamentary freedom as a right that inhered in sane and rational men and women. Sanity and rationality however, were defined by racial and sexual ideologies that orchestrated the operation of probate law.

## Seeking a Moral Economy of War

### Confederate Women and Southern Nationalism in Civil War North Carolina

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*Jacqueline Glass Campbell*

By March 1865, time and geography had rendered North Carolina the ideal state for Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman to bring to fruition his plans to destroy both the military resources and the morale of the southern people. Here, a war-weary populace—beleaguered by four years of internal disorder, social banditry, the depredations of some deserters, and fear of slave insurrections—was now being pressed by enemy forces on all sides. It seemed logical, therefore, that the arrival of Sherman's troops would sound the death knell for resistance in a state already weakened by inner turmoil. Current scholarship on both the North Carolina home front and Confederate women supports this narrative of a downward spiral from disaffection to demoralization. But a closer examination of this moment when home front and battlefield truly merged suggests that civilians were far more resilient than the literature notes.

With three out of four eligible men in the army, the Confederacy depended on its women for both material and ideological support, placing them at the heart of the conflict. Yet the prevailing argument regarding Confederate women is that the war burdened them emotionally and materially in ways they were not prepared to handle. Thus, according to historian Drew Faust, slaveholding women became increasingly disillusioned and disaffected from all things military. Similarly, studies of the North Carolina home front focus on inner tensions within the state that further fueled disloyalty to the Confederacy. Both these analyses serve to underscore a vision of women's ambivalence to

war and tenuous link to nationalism. But, while many white women in North Carolina did indeed protest the burdens of war, flooding the governor's desk with letters and petitions, this did not necessarily equate to disloyalty. Instead, I believe that they sought to negotiate a moral economy in which hardships would be more equitably distributed and that the arrival of the Union army served as a catalyst to redirect existing resentments toward the enemy.<sup>1</sup>

As Sherman made plans for the final stage in his campaign through the Confederate heartland, he modified his tactics, reminding his troops that North Carolina had been one of the last states to secede and that "from the commencement of the war there has been in the State a strong Union party." In these circumstances "marked difference should be made in the manner in which we treat the people and the manner in which those of South Carolina were treated." Soldiers received instructions to take only what was necessary and not to enter private homes; officers were to be held accountable for the behavior of their men.<sup>2</sup> Although Sherman's men did indeed curtail the destruction they had wrought in South Carolina, the plundering of homes and malicious damage to treasured possessions remained ubiquitous acts that struck at the very heart of southern identity. Furthermore, North Carolinian women were also now eyewitnesses to battlefield carnage, as private homes were transformed into makeshift hospitals in the wake of remarkable Confederate resistance. Ironically, these women did not protest against the loss of life on the battlefield; rather they compared *traditional* warfare with Union depredations and wanton destruction of personal possessions and found the latter more reprehensible. They saw this behavior as a breach of the accepted ethics of warfare and shifted their antagonisms from the Confederate government toward the enemy. With the enemy on their doorstep, many Confederate women could now identify a direct link between the survival of their families and the nation and thus defend one in the name of both.

As Sherman's men crossed the border from South to North Carolina in March 1865, their outward appearance belied their good health and excellent spirits. The ardors of the journey had worn out uniforms and shoes, and smoke from the fires set in North Carolina's vast pine forests and rosin

1. Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Victoria E. Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

2. General Order No. 8, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1900) ser. 1, 47:719 (hereinafter cited as O.R.); Special Order No. 63, O.R., 760–61.

factories had blackened their faces. In a letter to his wife, the general described men “with smoke-black faces, dirty and ragged, many with feet bare or wrapped in cloth.”<sup>3</sup> Maj. S. S. Farwell wrote to his home paper in Iowa that soldiers were “barefooted, with their feet chapped and swollen, their clothes all ragged and torn from the long march through the swamps and brush.” Yet their disheveled condition could not quell their fine spirits. Lt. Robert Finley wrote that despite the fact that many were “barefoot and their clothing was ragged & dirty, yet they were willing to follow their leader wherever he went.” Sherman reported that his army was “as united and cheerful as ever, and as full of confidence in itself and its leaders.”<sup>4</sup>

Despite their worn and ragged condition, Union soldiers clearly felt neither the same degree of alienation nor the raging animosity that had fueled their destruction in the Palmetto State. An Illinois soldier was struck by the “Northern like” appearance of his North Carolina surroundings, especially the number of “small farms and nice white, tidy dwellings.” Maj. George Nichols saw an “air of thrift” around him that was a marked improvement on what he had observed in South Carolina. He believed that North Carolina farmers were a “vastly different class of men . . . who work with their own hands, and do not think themselves degraded thereby.”<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps this sense of familiarity encouraged a belief that here they would find a people who “would gladly embrace the old flag again, if they have the opportunity.” Capt. George Pepper articulated an opinion shared by many of his comrades, that “North Carolina could be made a thoroughly loyal State with a little persuasion.” This belief may have motivated the marked change in behavior upon which many soldiers commented. “There is a great difference in the behavior of the men since we got into NC.,” Captain Snow informed his family, “there being less pillaging & burning.” Michigan private Charles Brown thought that “the men seem by instinct to treat NC as well as possible.” Despite the fact that many of the men had their “feet tied up with cloths and old socks instead of shoes,” Colonel Jackson noted that they were

3. William T. Sherman to Ellen Sherman, Apr. 9, 1865, in *Home Letters of General Sherman*, ed. M. A. DeWolfe Howe (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909), 343.

4. Maj. S. S. Farwell, “The Palmetto Flag,” *Annals of Iowa* 15 (July 1925): 66; Lt. Robert Stuart Finley to “Friend Mary,” Mar. 30, 1865, Robert Stuart Finley Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina (hereinafter cited as SHC); William T. Sherman, *Memoirs* 2 vols. (1875; reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1984), 2:296.

5. Charles W. Wills, *Army Life of an Illinois Soldier* (Washington, D.C.: Globe Printing, 1906), 358; George Ward Nichols, *The Story of the Great March from the Diary of a Staff Officer* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1865), 222.

“not destroying property in this state like we did in South Carolina.” Yet he added—almost as an aside—“we have more forage than we need.”<sup>6</sup>

Although soldiers may have been more restrained, they were clearly helping themselves liberally to all that North Carolina had to offer. “You wanted to know if we had plenty to eat,” wrote Corp. John Herr to his sister, “we have more than we know what to do with.” One month after crossing into North Carolina, an Iowan officer informed his cousin that in only three of the last thirty-six days had he drawn army rations. “Most of the time we lived first rate . . . Sweet Potatoes, Ham, Bacon, Fresh Pork, Corn Meal, Honey, Chickens, Turkeys, Geese &c,” he wrote.<sup>7</sup> On March 19, a soldier noted in his diary the return of a squad that, after a five-day excursion, had amassed “a good abundance of forage.” Another particularly compassionate soldier told his family of the extreme poverty of the North Carolinians, many of whom were left destitute after the army had passed. He regretted that his ranks contained men so lacking in “feelings of humanity” that they would rob poor women and children of “the last morsel of bread they had on earth.” An Illinois officer explained that while sympathetic soldiers would leave needy families with some means of subsistence, less humane soldiers would follow and take everything so that the majority of citizens were left “utterly destitute.” Despite his orders to the contrary, in private correspondence General Sherman acknowledged that his men were “sweep[ing] the country like a swarm of locusts.” Soldiers engaged in such practices were apparently less loquacious than their more sympathetic counterparts, an exception being an Indiana infantryman who boasted in his diary that they had “stripped the country so clean that there is little left for any one.”<sup>8</sup>

6. Capt. George W. Pepper, *Personal Recollections of Sherman's Campaigns in Georgia and the Carolinas* (Zanesville, OH: Hugh Dunne, 1866), 343; Samuel Snow to Parents, Mar. 28, 1865, Snow Family Papers, and Charles S. Brown to “My Dear Etta,” Apr. 26, 1865, Charles S. Brown Papers, Special Collections, Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina (hereinafter cited as DUL); Oscar Lawrence Jackson, *The Colonel's Diary* (Sharon: np, 1922), 197–98.

7. John Herr to “Kind Sister,” Mar. 12, 1865, John Herr Papers, DUL; Robert Hoadley to “Cousin Em,” Apr. 8, 1865, Robert Bruce Hoadley Papers, DUL; see also Y. J. Powell to Ellen Aumack, Mar. 27, 1865, Ellen Aumack Papers, DUL; Charles Fessenden Morse, *Letters Written during the Civil War, 1861–1865* (privately printed, 1898), 212.

8. Wills, *Army Life of an Illinois Soldier*, 364; Edward W. Benham to “Dear Jennie,” Mar. 9, 1865, Edward W. Benham Papers, DUL; D. F. Fleharty, *Our Regiment: A History of the 102nd Illinois Infantry Volunteers* (Chicago: Brewster & Hanscom Printers, 1865) 154; William T. Sherman to his wife, Apr. 9, 1865, *Home Letters of General Sherman*, 342; Oscar Osburn Winther, ed., *With Sherman to the Sea: The Civil War Letters, Diaries and Reminiscences of Theodore F. Upton* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 158.



Sherman's men were only the most recent group to rob civilians of their provisions. North Carolinians had been complaining for some time about bands of "confederate raiders," who "laid waist the countryside." Confederate officials, both political and military, also voiced concerns regarding "depredations or outrages" which were being "committed indiscriminately" by men who were worse than any "plague" inflicted on the Egyptians.<sup>9</sup> A Confederate officer sent from Virginia to round up deserters in the Piedmont area reported that in North Carolina he was able to "supply the men with more and better provisions." Lee's army had become increasingly dependent on supplies from its southern neighbor, especially at the end of 1864 after Union raids ravaged Virginia's landscape. Now the newly reinstated Gen. Joseph Johnston learned that food supplies stored in depots across North Carolina were earmarked for the army of Northern Virginia, and he would have to feed his defending troops "by collecting subsistence through the country."<sup>10</sup>

Among all these pilfering groups, the long-suffering folk of North Carolina found one particularly troublesome. Bands of Confederate deserters who regularly raided homes had been an ongoing problem for some time, and when news came of the advancing Yankee army, the people felt they "were being swallowed up." Nowhere seemed safe, wrote one citizen, describing people in his community who were "trying to hide their provisions expecting the enemy or deserters." When these bands of Confederate renegades attacked North Carolina homes, they left behind scenes of confusion and devastation curiously similar to those wrought by Sherman's men. "Everything is torn to pieces," read one description of a recent raid. "My dear father's safe is broken and a large amount of money taken, besides so many other things it is impossible to enumerate."<sup>11</sup> Nor did these raiders satisfy themselves with robbery. In one young woman's neighborhood they had been "taking a wide swath for some weeks, robbing, beating, plundering, &c." A man who

9. Andrew Barnard to Z. B. Vance, Dec. 30, 1864, and John Roberts to Z. B. Vance, both in Gov. Zebulon B. Vance Papers, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, North Carolina (hereinafter cited as NCDAH); O.R. ser. 4, 2:1061-62.

10. Nicholas Gibson diary, appendix, Nicholas Biddle Gibson Papers, Special Collections, Atkins Library, University of North Carolina, Charlotte, North Carolina; O.R. ser. 1, vol 47:1203, 1234; see also William Blair, *Virginia's Private War: Feeding Body and Soul in the Confederacy, 1861-1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 121.

11. J. M. Worth to Jonathan Worth, Mar. 9, 1865, in *The Correspondence of Jonathan Worth*, ed. J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton, 2 vols. (Raleigh: Edwards & Broughton Printing, 1909), 1:364; J. J. Jackson to Jonathan Worth, Mar. 12, 1865, *ibid.*, 1:365; Anon to Jonathan Worth, Mar. 2, 1865, *ibid.*, 1:261-62.

signed himself “A Quaker” was horrified at the “hundreds of robberys and thefts, to say nothing of the numerous murders committed by the deserters.” Although he had originally supposed that deserters shared his pacifist sympathies, he now condemned their actions. Others reported that these “perfect outlaws” were becoming increasingly “bold and defiant,” creating a “deplorable condition.”<sup>12</sup>

General Lee himself expressed concern over the number of desertions among North Carolina troops. Lee’s belief that these were “occasioned to a considerable extent by letters written to the soldiers by their friends at home” has been used as evidence of the waning loyalty of the Tar Heel State. However, recent scholarship has challenged the view that North Carolina led the Confederate states in the number of desertions, arguing that these figures were based on erroneous War Department records. Also, because extant correspondence between battlefield and home front consists mainly of letters written by soldiers to their families, it is difficult to ascertain that it was, in fact, requests from increasingly disaffected civilians that motivated desertions. Scholars have argued that it was the motive, rather than the act, that constituted desertion, suggesting that we should give a more nuanced interpretation to this phenomenon.<sup>13</sup>

To be sure, by the spring of 1865, Gov. Zebulon B. Vance’s desk was flooded with letters and petitions, most often penned by white women of the Tar Heel State. They frequently warned the authorities of the dangers of increased desertion. Rather than expressing disloyalty, these epistles might more usefully be defined as tools of negotiation.<sup>14</sup> For example, one woman asked the governor to put a stop to speculators who were keeping supplies from soldiers’ families while assuring him that “I never had tried to discourage my husband any at all—I try to encourage him all I can.” Nevertheless her letter also contained a warning that unless things improved, soldiers would become “disheartened.” “I don’t want them to have to come home

12. Easter [Robins] to Marmaduke Robins, Mar. 13, 1865, Marmaduke S. Robins Papers, SHC; “A Quaker” to M. S. Robins, Jan. 20, 1865, *ibid.*; W. J. Foust to Jonathan Worth, Feb. 3, 1865, *The Correspondence of Jonathan Worth*, 1:343; J. M. Worth to Jonathan Worth, Mar. 9, 1865, *ibid.*, 1:356; Jonathan Worth to ?, Jan. 8, 1865, *ibid.*, 1:338.

13. Richard Reid, “A Test Cry of the ‘Crying Evil’: Desertion among North Carolina Troops during the Civil War,” *North Carolina Historical Review* 58 (June 1981): 234–62; Blair, *Virginia’s Private War*, 129–30.

14. Gen. Robert E. Lee to Gov. Z. B. Vance, Feb. 24, 1865, O.R. ser. 1, 47:1270; Amy E. Murrell, “‘Of Necessity and Public Benefit’: Southern Families and Their Appeals for Protection,” in *Southern Families at War: Loyalty and Conflict in the Civil War South*, ed. Catherine Clinton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 77–99.

without an honorable peace,” she wrote, “and if they will find me plenty to eat my husband will fight through this war.” Another woman expressed similar sentiments, bitterly resenting the deserters who were “robbing, an’ taking, an’ stealing everything they want, an’ threatening the lives of our loyal citizens.” She urged the governor to provide her community with “home defense.” Were soldiers to hear of the vulnerability of their families, “it will almost cause them to desert the camp an’ come home.” Above all, she wrote, “I don’t want no more deserters.” In a final plea she wrote, “I have seen my native land run over as long as I can bear;” yet she insisted that she wanted everything “for the best” and hoped to “have an independent Confederacy before another year runs round.” Harriett McMasters also urged the governor to take harsher measures against deserters, saying that her only brother was in the army, and she would “ten times rather he would die there than he should run away.”<sup>15</sup>

We cannot assume that civilians who wrote letters to Confederate authorities alerting them to the potential of increased desertions were disloyal. The truly disaffected would surely not have drawn attention to themselves. This was especially true of the women of the Confederacy for whom desertion posed a multitude of problems; not only were their homes subjected to the raids of these marauders, but when their menfolk did desert, women found themselves burdened with the extra responsibility of hiding and feeding outlaws.<sup>16</sup>

By the end of January 1865, officials and citizens alike were calling for severe measures be taken against deserters and those who protected them. Brig. Gen. Theophilus Holmes called for reinforcements in order that he might apprehend deserters, fearing that “the disaffection among those of our people who harbor or protect them will react unfavorably on the troops in the fields.” A woman in Randolph County asked the governor to instruct the Home Guard to “take no prisoners,” urging that those who harbor deserters should also be “arrested and punished severely.” Many families with men in the army resented others who shirked their duties and called for harsher

15. Susan C. Wooker to Z. B. Vance, Apr. 3, 1864, quoted in W. Buck Years and John G. Barrett, eds., *North Carolina Civil War Documentary* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 262–63; Mrs. Sue O. Conly to Gov. Z. B. Vance, Jan. 5, 1865, Gov. Zebulon B. Vance Papers, NCDAH; Harriett McMasters to Marmaduke Robins, Feb. 16, 1865, Marmaduke S. Robins Papers, SHC.

16. David Dodge, “The Cave-Dwellers of the Confederacy,” *Atlantic Monthly* 68 (1891): 519; Bynum, *Unruly Women*, 132.

reprisals against both the men themselves and their families, upon whom they depended for support.<sup>17</sup>

The female kin of deserters were frequently the targets of reprisals by the Home Guard and State Militia, suffering greater extremes of violence at the hands of southern men than they experienced from William T. Sherman and his hardened veterans. Confederate authorities were well aware that deserters required the support of their families to ensure their survival. The assistant secretary of war noted that these men were “everywhere shielded by their families.” A late-nineteenth-century commentator argued that the burden of the deserter’s wife was even greater than that of a soldier’s wife. Not only did she share the anxiety that her husband might be captured or killed, but she had the added responsibility of smuggling food to her husband and keeping his presence a secret. The author claimed that these women “proved quite as true and sacrificing as their more refined sisters who sent their husbands, sons, and brothers to the field instead of the woods.”<sup>18</sup> That this author identified these women as less refined was a concept shared by those units who sought out deserters, and their wrath was most often directed at women of the poorer classes.

It was their class as well as their gender that made these women targets. The poorer classes of North Carolina were traditionally viewed with suspicion by elites, who saw them as a potential threat to the social order. And gender provided no protection to the wives and mothers of deserters when Confederate authorities sought to flush out renegades. Governor Vance received disturbing reports of women tortured by state militia. Soldiers had slapped one woman, tied her thumbs together behind her back, and suspended her from a tree limb so her toes barely touched the ground. Over fifty women in each of Chatham, Randolph, and Davidson counties had been “dragged from their homes and put under close guard.” Five of these women were in a state of “advanced pregnancy.”<sup>19</sup> In one of the most severe incidents, women were whipped and hanged until near death. A young mother

17. Brig. Gen. Theophilus Holmes to Gen. S. Cooper, Jan. 31, 1865, Theophilus Hunter Holmes Papers, DUL; Harriett McMasters to Marmaduke Robins, Feb. 16, 1865, Marmaduke S. Robins Papers, SHC; Petition from N. C. Soldiers of Lee’s Army to Gov. Z. B. Vance, Jan. 24, 1865; Mrs. Sue O. Conly to Gov. Z. B. Vance, Jan. 5, 1865, Gov. Zebulon B. Vance Papers, NCDAH. Harriett McMasters to Marmaduke Robins, Feb. 16, 1865, Marmaduke S. Robins Papers SHC; Bynum, *Unruly Women*, 146.

18. O.R. ser. 1, 51:1054–65; Dodge, “The Cave-Dwellers of the Confederacy,” 519.

19. Thomas Settle to Gov. Z. B. Vance, Oct. 4, 1864, Thomas Settle Jr. Letters, NCDAH; Paul D. Escott, *Many Excellent People: Power and Privilege in North Carolina*,

was dragged outside in the snow and tied to a tree while her baby was left exposed in the doorway of her home. There, she was told, the infant would remain until she decided to cooperate.<sup>20</sup> Thus women often suffered violence at the hands of both deserters and Confederate authorities.

Violence was not a new phenomenon in the lives of ordinary men and women of North Carolina, nor were they averse to adopting an aggressive posture on their own behalf. Historian Paul Escott described the yeomanry of this state as a “self directed, stubborn and independent group,” who would fight “fiercely and on occasions violently to maintain their traditions and their autonomy.” Although Escott’s argument is not gender-specific, new studies have pointed out there was also historical precedent for disorderly female behavior in the state. North Carolina women were neither shielded from nor unwilling to use violence on their own behalf. Historian Laura Edwards has found that poor white women in the antebellum period were quite prepared to be violent and, even across class lines, “white women could be as brutal as their menfolk.”<sup>21</sup>

Women were most likely to display an aggressive posture in food riots conducted in retaliation for what they saw as economic injustices. In March 1863, in what was described by the local Greensboro newspapers as “A Female Raid,” approximately fifty soldiers’ wives attacked merchants they identified as speculators. Victoria Bynum argues that these riots provide evidence of women putting the needs of family before the needs of either state or nation. However, these women did not simply conduct a raid; they demanded to buy goods at a fair price. Although violence did break out when one merchant refused to sell them flour at a subsidized cost, the women who forcibly seized the goods then made certain that they were equitably distributed. Despite appeals to North Carolinian women not to take the law into their own hands, further riots occurred across the state. That both newspapers and government officials directed their pleas to women reveals a recognition

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1850–1900 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 20; Bynum, *Unruly Women*, 143–44.

20. Phillip Shaw Paludan, *Victims: A True Story of the Civil War* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981), 896.

21. Escott, *Many Excellent People*, xviii–xix; Laura F. Edwards, “Law, Domestic Violence, and the Limits of Patriarchal Authority in the Antebellum South,” *Journal of Southern History* 75 (Nov. 1999): 742–43; Kirsten Fischer, “‘False, Feigned, and Scandalous Words’: Sexual Slander and Racial Ideology among Whites in Colonial North Carolina,” in *“The Devil’s Lane”: Sex and Race in the Early South*, ed. Catherine Clinton and Michele Gillespie (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 139–53.

of their political actions and also assumes a literate audience, indicating that these actions were not confined to the lowest, least educated classes.<sup>22</sup>

These women were explicit in their actions and did not see them as evidence of disloyalty to the Confederate cause. Instead, they pursued social justice supported by the consensus of their respective communities. These actions bear striking similarity to the food riots that occurred in eighteenth-century England, described by historian E. P. Thompson as “a pattern of social protest which derives from a consensus as to the moral economy of the common-weal in times of dearth.” The women in North Carolina were driven by a similar sense of legitimation; their purpose was not destruction or theft but setting a fair price. And, as William Blair has argued for Confederate Virginia, “it was possible to be discouraged by one’s government, and mad at the rich, while still pulling for the Confederacy.”<sup>23</sup>

When long-suffering North Carolinians sent correspondence to the governor, they were not expressing disloyalty, but rather using their knowledge of their own political and military influence to seek a moral economy of war. A poor widow with two sons in the army complained of the “numberless frauds practiced upon civilians by Government officials.” Still, she did not object to her sons’ military service; “had I more,” she wrote, “they should all go.” Her objection was to the “young able-bodied men here at home with nothing to keep them out of the army but some petty office that might be filled better by older men unfit for service.” While she assured the governor that she was motivated by “nothing but a sincere desire to serve my country,” these young men, possessed of “neither age nor judgment . . . render the government of which they are the representatives exceedingly trivial and tyrannical in the eyes of those who have neither ability nor opportunity to rightly understand our glorious nationality.” A woman who signed herself “Nina” told Governor Vance that she had lost her oldest son and had three others in service. “I just want to say to you,” she wrote, “if you have one particle of respect of the Ladys in our country take the men at 55 . . . and no exemptions.” The men in her town who held government offices were abusing their positions, and those were the very ones she wanted to see in the

22. Escott, *Many Excellent People*, 65–66; Bynum, *Unruly Women*, 125–26, 134, 145, 149.

23. E. P. Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,” *Past and Present* 50 (Feb. 1971): 126. Drew Gilpin Faust, *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism: Ideology Identity in the Civil War South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 52–55; William Blair, *Virginia’s Private War*, 132.

army. Despite her frustration at the injustices of the system, she declared “my sons are for you no matter what you ever offer—for I have six.” Another citizen wrote that “the people would pay with cheerfulness five times the amount [of taxes] if the wants of the government required it,” if only the system was not so “unequal and unjust in its operation.”<sup>24</sup>

Many of these letters expressed discontent with the state of affairs, yet came from citizens who stressed their loyalty. When they asked for a discharge or a furlough for a male family member, women truly believed that this would be beneficial to the greater cause. One such woman from Alexander County stressed the need of her entire community for her father’s mechanical skills. In fact there was such a demand for his work that “3 or 4 Petitions [were] sent to the secretary of war all assigned[sic] by the county seal.” She assumed that it was “by negligence” that they had received no response. She had often heard it said that her father “would do more good to be at home an’ work for the people than 20 good soldiers would do in the field.” Harriet S. Briley requested either a discharge or furlough for a member of her community, declaring “he will do more good at home than he will in the army.” Briley believed that she had earned the right to ask for such a favor; when Vance was running for election, she had given him “the praise of being a fine man and . . . don’ all I could to reelect you again.” Although without a vote of her own, this woman was clearly aware of her political influence.<sup>25</sup>

Women protested social inequities by claiming moral justification and inherent rights, demanding a response from the government. The letters and petitions that arrived on Governor Vance’s desk in the last few months of the war reveal a political logic that contradicts George Rable’s argument that “wives and mothers seemed pathetically parochial” in assuming authorities would devote attention to their plight.<sup>26</sup>

The very personal nature of these epistles suggests an intimate connection with the Confederate cause and an enduring confidence in Governor Vance. General Lee encouraged the North Carolina governor to make every effort to raise the spirits of those on the home front by holding public meetings.

24. “A Southern Woman” to Gov. Z. B. Vance, Dec. 12, 1864; “Nina” to Gov. Vance, Dec. 30, 1864; H. Nutt to Gov. Vance, Dec. 12, 1864, all in Gov. Zebulon Vance Papers, NCDAH.

25. Sue O. Conly to Gov. Z. B. Vance, Jan. 5, 1865; Harriet S. Briley to Gov. Z. B. Vance, Dec. 30, 1865; see also Mrs. Richard Drake to Gov. Z. B. Vance, Dec. 27, 1864; M. L. Wiggins to Gov. Z. B. Vance, Jan. 1, 1865; Mary Newton to Gov. Z. B. Vance, Jan. 10, 1865, all in Gov. Zebulon B. Vance Papers, NCDAH.

26. George C. Rable, *Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of Southern Nationalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 74.

North Carolina regimental commanders also recommended going to the people “with words of cheer, encouraging the timid, satisfying the discontented, and suppressing party discord.” And in fact the personal influence of Governor Vance remained an important rallying point.<sup>27</sup> Even in the darkest of days many people believed his attendance at public meetings would “be able to accomplish more than any other man.” In a ten-day period in February the governor received six requests from various North Carolina towns to make a personal appearance. His presence would “be productive of much good . . . giving strength and tone to public sentiment and to aid in bringing out the full resources of the County in this hour or period,” said one such invitation. Members of a hospital committee in Raleigh requested that he attend a meeting of “sick and wounded soldiers” so that he might hear for himself their “resolutions expressive of their determination to prosecute the war with vigor until our independence is unconditionally acknowledged.” In the final days of the war one southern woman reported that citizens frequently called at the governor’s office for “advice and comfort,” and “none left him without greater courage to meet what was coming.”<sup>28</sup>

In public speeches Vance stressed the need for social harmony and attempted to redirect the discontent of North Carolinians by vilifying the Yankee enemy. Although it has been argued that it was too late for such diversionary tactics, many responded with renewed determination.<sup>29</sup> One woman who had been anxiously contemplating the arrival of Sherman’s troops heard Vance’s rousing words. She trusted her governor’s assurance of “ultimate success” and determined to follow his advice to “be of good cheer & to stand by one another & vigorously to prosecute the war.” A member of the Home Guard urged that the organization be made more efficient and thus “show to Sherman that his late ‘strategic movement’ through Georgia could not be repeated.” And a woman who had bitterly complained about the infamous acts of deserters determined that the Yankees be stopped in

27. William T. Sherman to Maj. Gen. Q. A. Gilmore, Mar. 14, 1865, OR ser. 1, 47: 857; Gen. Robert E. Lee to Gov. Z.B. Vance, Feb. 24, 1865, *ibid.*, 1270; North Carolina Officers to W. A. Graham, Feb. 27, 1865, William Alexander Graham Papers, SHC.

28. Telegram from Chapel Hill, Feb. 23, 1865; Telegram from ?, Warrenton, Feb. 18, 1865 Telegram from the Committee of General Hospital Raleigh, Feb. 21, 1865, Gov. Zebulon B. Vance Papers, NCDAH; Cornelia Phillips Spencer, *The Last Ninety Days of the War in North Carolina* (New York: Watchman Publishing, 1866), 147; Richard E. Beringer et al., *Why the South Lost the Civil War* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 210.

29. Gov. Zebulon B. Vance’s Proclamation to the People of North Carolina, Feb. 14, 1865, O.R. ser. 1, 47:1187–92; Escott, *Many Excellent People*, 76, 83; Bynum, *Unruly Women*, 149–50.



North Carolina and that her people should “whip them worse than they ever have been whipt.” Yet even those who felt too beset by problems to respond to diversionary rhetoric might regroup when they became eyewitnesses to the Yankee invasion.<sup>30</sup>

Ironically, as white North Carolinians faced multiple enemies in the early months of 1865, blacks in the state felt similarly threatened. African Americans occupied a liminal space between two racist forces, neither of which recognized slaves’ individual humanity, but both of which understood slavery as central to the viability of the Confederacy. In its aftermath, one ex-slave described the war through the metaphor of two venomous snakes, “one lying wid his head pintin’ north, de other wid his head pintin’ south. . . . Both bit de nigger, an’ dey wus both bad.” Racial fears ran high in North Carolina as the patterns of paternalism under which slavery had functioned broke down. Some planters from the East Coast moved their slaves inland, away from the Union lines; and as refugees, black and white, flooded the cities, residents began to fear social unrest. Concerns were voiced of towns “fill[ed] with strangers.” In Charlotte one diarist noted that “everything was in confusion [with] refugees and fleeing negroes.”<sup>31</sup> Sherman’s arrival in the state, his troops accompanied by several thousand fugitive slaves, only exacerbated the growing tension. Rumors of slave insurrections were rife. From across the state the governor received reports of blacks charged with “[c]onspiracy and plotting and persuading other slaves to insurrection.” One man wrote that a plot had been uncovered of a “general massacre . . . of all white persons, regardless of age, sex or condition, except such as they might choose & select for wives or concubines.” One of the alleged conspirators had been hanged, and forty more awaited trial. Similar reports arrived of plans to murder white men and “have the young white Ladys for their companions.” A Confederate soldier wrote that he had heard of “numerous arrests of slaves . . . & several hung by the incensed citizens.” A news correspondent in the Union army thought it was a “barbarous business” when he learned that a group of fugi-

30. Beth G. Crabtree and James W. Patton, eds. *Journal of a Secesh Lady: The Diary of Catherine Ann Devereux Edmondston, 1860–1866* (Raleigh: Division of Archives and History, 1979), 666; letter to the editor of the *Conservative*, Feb. 7, 1865, Marmaduke S. Robins Papers, SHC; Easter to Marmaduke Robins, Mar. 12, 1865, *ibid*; see also Robert Strange to Robert Strange Jr., Feb. 1865, Robert Strange Jr. Papers, SHC; Blair Virginia’s *Private War*, 76, 79.

31. George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Biography* 19 vols. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972), vol. 15, 2:123; Mayor of Greensboro to Gov. Z. B. Vance, Jan. 19, 1865, Gov. Zebulon B. Vance Papers, NCDAH; David Schenck diary, Feb. 1865, SHC.

tive slaves had been “captured, and after a kind of mock trial, twenty five were hung.”<sup>32</sup>

Into this seething cauldron of racial anxieties Gen. William T. Sherman rid his army of its “encumbrance” of “20,000 to 30,000 useless mouths,” whom he complained had “clung to our skirts, impeded our movements and consumed our food.” A Union major echoed these sentiments, writing that Sherman’s march had been a “marvel of military operations,” especially “with twenty five thousand useless, helpless human beings, devouring food and clogging every step onward.” A Union officer described the departing refugees as a “flock of black sheep.” The ragged group, made up mostly of women and children, took three hours to pass by the camp gate.<sup>33</sup>

These black refugees, who were taken by Union boats to the North Carolina coast, no doubt fared better than their counterparts who resided in the area where Sherman and his men continued their pattern of plunder. As in South Carolina, many white owners had warned their slaves that the Yankees would treat them harshly, and many slaves were frightened by the hordes of blue-coated soldiers who swarmed into their homes. It seemed to one slave that the air was “dark wid Yankees.” He had never seen as many “mans, hosses, an’ mules” in his life. Parker Pool saw enough Yankees to “whup anything on God’s earth.” Slaves complained that Sherman’s men stole their clothes and possessions, in one case even taking their shoes. Fannie Dunn’s recollection that “one Yankee would come along an’ give us sumptin’ and’ another would come on behind him an’ tak it,” was a common remonstrance.<sup>34</sup> A young southern woman wrote to a friend that, in her opinion, “Mr. Sherman . . . is pursuing the wrong policy to accomplish his designs.” “The Negroes are bitterly prejudiced to his minions,” she continued. “They were treated, if possible, worse than the white folks, all their provisions taken and their clothes destroyed.” It soon became apparent to the slaves that the northern soldiers’ primary concern was not the welfare of African

32. Justices of Peace, Richmond County to Gov. Z. B. Vance, Dec. 9, 1864; H. Nutt to Gov. Z. B. Vance, Dec. 10, 1864; Anon to Gov. Z. B. Vance, Dec. 13, 1864, all in Gov. Zebulon B. Vance Papers, NCDAH; diary of Capt. Lewis H. Webb, Dec. 22, 1864, DUL; Capt. David P. Conyngham, *Sherman’s March through the South with Sketches and Incidents of the Campaign* (New York: Sheldon, 1865), 355.

33. W. T. Sherman to U. S. Grant, Mar. 12, 1865, O.R. ser. 1, 47:794–95; W. T. Sherman to Maj. Gen. Terry, Mar. 12, 1865, *ibid.*, 803; Nichols, *The Story of the Great March*, 252; Richard Harwell and Philip N. Racine, eds., *The Fiery Trail: A Union Officer’s Account of Sherman’s Last Campaigns* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1986), 184, 186.

34. Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 14, 1:136, 178; vol. 15, 2:200; vol. 14, 1:387, 97, 271; vol. 15, 2:111, 288.

Americans. Lila Nichols described them as a “pack o’robbers . . . [who] stold ever’tthing they could lay hand’s on an’ [who] tore up ever’tthing scand’lous.” As a result of such actions, she and others concluded that Yankees “doan ker’ bout de Niggers, but day ain’t wanted our white folks ter be rich.”<sup>35</sup>

Although the testimony of ex-slaves was written down years later and reflected the bitterness of dashed expectations, blacks and whites joined in condemning Sherman’s men for malicious damage and especially for the indiscriminate slaughtering of livestock. “A Yankee wuz pisen to a yard full of cows,” recalled freedwoman Kitty Hill. “Sometimes dey would shoot a hog an’ just take de hams an’ leave de rest dere to spill,” she continued. Others remembered seeing Yankees “cut de hams off’n a live pig or ox an’ go off leavin’ de animal groanin’ . . . it wuz awful.”<sup>36</sup>

The empty stomachs of blacks and whites alike turned queasy at the overpowering stench of dead animals, slaughtered by the Yankees, that littered the streets of city and the fields of countryside alike. Across the Carolinas civilians bitterly resented this wanton waste. In one of the most evenhanded accounts to come from South Carolina, William Simms reported that the city of Columbia had been well-off for provisions and would have gladly handed a fair share of these to feed the Union soldiers had they so requested. In fact he did not even complain that Sherman fed his men on the provisions of the country—what infuriated him was destruction of livestock that left behind a famished people. “On all the farms and plantations, and along the road sides everywhere, for many miles, horses, mules and cattle strew the face of the country,” he wrote. When Esther Alden returned to her North Carolina home she inhaled a “sickening stench” from carcasses that littered the roads. “There being only women and children at home, the dead creatures are buried nowhere,” she wrote. Ex-slaves also remembered the “de awfulest stink” and “the sky black with turkey buzzards.” Even years later one young woman remembered the most bloodcurdling sound of the war was “the scream of a mortally wounded horse.” In a particularly gruesome incident, wire was tied around the legs and necks of calves in such a way that, when they tried to walk, “the jagged end of the wire would penetrate the throat.”<sup>37</sup>

35. Janie Smith to ?, Apr. 12, 1865, Mrs. Thomas H. Webb Papers, NCDAH; Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 14, 2:149, 150, 75; see also vol. 14, 1:361.

36. Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 14, 1:425, 459, and see also vol. 14, 1:293, 430, 455, and vol. 15, 2:190, 224.

37. William Gilmore Simms, *Sack and Destruction of the City of Columbia, South Carolina*, ed. Alexander Samuel Salley (1895; reprint, Atlanta: Oglethorpe University Press, 1937), 53–54, 82; Esther Alden diary, Mar. 14 and 15, 1865, in *When Sherman Came*:

Even before Sherman crossed the state line, violence had become almost a daily affair in North Carolina, and the disorder only increased with the invasion of Yankee troops. Women alone in their homes prepared themselves as best they could. One ex-slave recalled her mistress “set her mouf,” claiming she would “fix” the Yankees when they arrived. “When she done dat I ran an hid,” she continued, “kaze I done seed Mis’ Virgini set her mouf befo’ an’ I knowed she meant biznes’.” When Sherman’s men arrived Miss Virginia refused to be intimidated, claiming she would not be scared by “no ugly braggin’ Yankee.” Another slave remembered her mistress looking at Yankee marauders “wid her black eyes snapping.” Lila Nichols’s mistress tried to lock her door against the invaders, but they kicked it in and “insult[ed] de white wimmen an’ de blacks alike.” Nellie Worth was one white woman who turned the tables on the soldiers who invaded her home. Although the arrival of the soldiers surprised her, she was not afraid. “It seemed as though my very soul had turned to stone,” she wrote, “and I knew, felt, nor cared for anything.” When the soldiers compelled her to play the piano for their amusement, she vowed to play nothing but southern songs. She recalled with pride that she breathed “all the fire in my soul” into her rendition of “The Bonnie Blue Flag” and “Dixie.” Forcing southern women to play for them was a favorite pastime of soldiers. Annie Jones recalled a “perfect saturnalia” as the black women of her household were forced to dance to her musical accompaniment. When another young woman refused to perform, the soldiers played for themselves, although their choice was “Yankee Doodle & other pieces of the same character.”<sup>38</sup> Southern women bitterly resented these rites of humiliation, but there were other forms of “mischief” that hit them even harder.

In private homes and public buildings, Sherman’s men also destroyed items that were closely connected with identity and heritage. In courthouses soldiers were seen “defacing large account books and scattering the papers”

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*Southern Women and the “Great March,”* ed. Katherine M. Jones (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964), 362–63; Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 15, 2:190; Testimony of Violet Guntharpe in *Before Freedom*, ed. Belinda Hurmence (New York: Mentor Books, 1990), 96; Sally Hawthorne Memoirs, in *When Sherman Came*, 284; excerpt from *Winnsboro Courier*, n.d., typed transcript in Mordecai Family Papers, SHC.

38. Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 14, 1:149–50, 11; vol. 15, 2:149–50; Nellie Worth to “My Dear Cousin,” Mar. 21, 1865, in *When Sherman Came*, 261; Annie I. Jones to ?, Mar. 6, 1865, Cadwallader Jones Papers, SHC; Elizabeth Hinsdale to John Hinsdale, n.d., and to “My darling child,” Mar. 23, 1865, Hinsdale Family Papers, SHC; for a Union soldier’s account of such an incident see Charles S. Brown to “My Dear Etta,” Apr. 26, 1865, Charles S. Brown Papers, DUL.

and leaving archival records “in confusion amongst the dirt.” Pvt. John Metzgar even confessed stealing historical papers from the state capitol in Raleigh. But when, in the privacy of southern homes, the invaders put their “vile touch” on personal mementos and pictures, they left wounds that would fester for generations. Acts that were intended to destroy southern cultural identity would, ironically, often serve to both reinvigorate and reshape Confederate identity in years to come.<sup>39</sup>

Evidence of such malicious damage can be found in the testimony of combatants and noncombatants alike. A Michigan private told his family that “time & again,” he saw soldiers “pounding piano keys with their hatchets to see who could make the most noise, or pile up a pile of plates to see who could break the most.” It seemed to a Union army surgeon that almost “every house was torn up & the clothing scattered.” It was not uncommon to see “elegant sofas broken and the fragments scattered about the ground, paintings and engravings pierced with bayonets or slashed with swords, rosewood center-table, chairs, &c., broken to pieces and burned for fuel.”<sup>40</sup> Josephine Worth was appalled that “even the family Bible was not sacred,” as a soldier spread it over his steed’s back for a saddle.<sup>41</sup>

Stripping families of the necessities of life caused immediate hardships, but the destruction of those items that were an integral part of social relationships struck a blow to the very heart of southern identity. Such acts have been described by one scholar of Confederate women as tearing into the “sinews of memory that bound families together and to past generations.”<sup>42</sup> Perhaps no one personifies this process more than a young planter woman, who struck a preemptive blow against such an atrocity by destroying her own personal papers. In mid-April 1865, she wrote, “I find myself without a record of my life.” Her moving account continues:

39. Bruce Cauthen, “Opposing Forces: Confederate Nationalism and Familial Disintegration in the Civil War South,” paper given at “Families at War” Symposium, Richmond, Virginia, Apr. 1998, 15; Edmund J. Cleveland diary, Apr. 16, 1865, SHC; Jacqueline Glass Campbell, *When Sherman Marched North from the Sea: Resistance on the Confederate Home Front* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003) 105–10.

40. Charles S. Brown to “My Dear Etta,” Apr. 26, 1865, Charles S. Brown Papers, DUL; E. P. Burton, *Diary of E. P. Burton, Surgeon, 7th Regiment Illinois* (Des Moines, IA: Historical Records Survey, 1939), 70; Pepper, *Personal Recollections*, 331; Joseph T. Glatthaar, *The March to the Sea and Beyond* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 148–49.

41. Jones, *When Sherman Came*, 268, 284; Rawick, *The American Slave* vol. 15, 2:217.

42. Rable, *Civil Wars*, 173.

Every letter I possessed, letters which I had cherished as my heart's blood, mementos of those I had loved & lost years ago, literary memoranda, excerpts, abstracts, records of my own private examination, poetry—all destroyed & as I look at my empty cabinets & desks & feel the void that their emptiness causes within my heart a hatred more bitter than ever rises within me as I think of the “loathed Yankee” whose vulgar curiosity & unbounded barbarity has rendered the destruction of these private papers a matter of self-preservation.

It had been especially heartbreaking to burn her husband's love letters, and she could hardly refrain from snatching them from the flames. Only the thought of seeing them “in Yankee hands, or hearing them read in vile Yankee drawl amidst peals of vulgar Yankee laughter, or worse still, of knowing them heralded abroad in Yankee sensational newspapers” had restrained her. She had heard that private papers, stolen from southern households, had been published in northern newspapers “to a vulgar curious world as specimens of Southern thought, Southern feeling, & Southern composition.”<sup>43</sup>

Such acts were not unique to North Carolina, and similar horror was expressed in the other states through which Sherman swept. In South Carolina, a woman described Yankees scattering and trampling upon “pictures, old letters, locks of hair, pressed flowers and other hallowed mementos of the dead.” A Georgian woman wrote of how wretched she felt when Yankees pried into “sacred” items, “even into father's papers and relics of the dead.” “If I live a thousand years I shall never forget the enemies of our country,” she continued.<sup>44</sup> But in North Carolina such malicious destruction took on a particular poignancy as civilians were also witness to more traditional types of warfare.

Confederate forces twice engaged Sherman's men in desperate efforts to stop his progress across North Carolina, exposing citizens to the carnage of battle. Janie Smith witnessed both the pillaging of her home by Union troops and the mutilated bodies of soldiers when her home was used as a makeshift hospital. In a lengthy letter to a friend, she complained bitterly of Union soldiers breaking her furniture, stealing clothes, and killing animals. She accused these men of being “fiends incarnate” compared with the Confederate “army of patriots fighting for their hearthstone.” Sherman's men made her “too

43. Crabtree, *Journal of a Secesh Lady*, 696.

44. Mrs. J. J. B. in *When Sherman Came*, 143; Loula to Poss, May 22, 1865, quoted in Stephen V. Ash, *When the Yankees Came: Conflict and Chaos in the Occupied South, 1861–1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 40.

angry to eat or sleep,” and if any of these “scoundrels” had the “impudence” to speak to her, she only acknowledged them with “the haughtiest nod.” Within days her ransacked home was filled with wounded Confederate soldiers, and “every barn and outhouse was filled and under every shed and tree tables were carried for amputating the limbs.” Her words convey powerful images of broken bodies and human suffering. “Blood lay in puddles in the grove” she wrote, “the groans of the dying and the complaints of those undergoing amputation was horrible.” A Confederate soldier remembered wounded men, left with townspeople, who “lay stretched upon the hard floor, many of them still weltering in their blood, and some of them with broken limbs that had not been attended to.”<sup>45</sup>

Although Janie Smith was heartbroken to see the mutilated bodies of her countrymen, the only accusation she chronicled in her letter was that Yankee soldiers had behaved like “hyenas” when they plundered her home. Other white southern women’s accounts similarly emphasize the miscreant behavior of the Yankees over the men struck down in battle. Sally Hawthorne complained at length that, in a Fayetteville church, Bibles were “mutilated and defaced.” Almost as an aside she mentioned that the hospitals in town were “full of sick and wounded soldiers” and the streets “strewn with dead and wounded men.” In a similar vein Alice Campbell wrote pages describing Yankee soldiers ransacking her trunks and bureaus, damaging family portraits, and pouring flour and molasses onto fine carpets. Only at the end does she note that “hospitals . . . were filled to overflowing.” Elizabeth Hinsdale worked in the Fayetteville hospital, where wounded men were strewn on the floor. Her condemnation of the Yankee “fiends” was not, however, for killing men, but for their killing of animals and tearing to shreds “all the clothing of women and children.”<sup>46</sup>

It was a soldier’s duty to give his life for his country, and as painful as it was for civilians to see bleeding bodies and amputated limbs, they accepted this as part of the moral economy of warfare. What was not acceptable, however, was the reprehensible conduct of Yankee miscreants in civilian

45. Janie Smith to Janie Robeson, Apr. 12, 1865, typed transcript in Mrs. Thomas H. Webb Papers, NCDAH; Baxter Smith Reminiscences, quoted in Mark L. Bradley, *Last Stand in the Carolinas: The Battle of Bentonville* (Campbell, CA: Savas Woodbury Publishers, 1996), 135.

46. Janie Smith to Janie Robeson, Apr. 12, Mrs. Thomas Webb Papers, NCDAH; Jones, *When Sherman Came*, 284, 274–75, 290, 301; Elizabeth Hinsdale to “My darling child,” Mar. 23, 1865, Hinsdale Family Papers, SHC.

homes. Catherine Edmondston wrote that such “works of pillage” were a “breach in the courtesies of war.” Even a Union soldier believed that it was the “wanton destruction of property” that would burn the longest in southern memory. He was convinced that “all other causes of estrangement will pass away and be forgotten before this one is forgiven . . . because it has neither justification nor palliation.” A Michigan private harbored similar sentiments when he wrote that in the light of such depredations he would not blame the South “if they do go to guerrilla warfare.” In her account of the last days of the Confederacy, North Carolinian author Cornelia Spencer wrote that the hatred of southerners had been aroused, not by their fallen heroes, but by acts of “indiscriminate and licensed pillage,” which were “more to be deprecated than any consequence of the blood shed in fair and open fight during the war.”<sup>47</sup>

The clash of material deprivation and ideological beliefs served as a catalyst to focus citizens’ discontent away from their government and toward the enemy who had violated their sense of moral economy—not by the killing of soldiers in battle but by the personal indignities to which they had subjected the noncombatants. And although the final military confrontation in North Carolina ended with a Confederate retreat, neither side believed the war to be over. Janie Smith ended her letter with vengeance in her heart for the “widows and orphans left naked and starving” and a firm conviction that “desolation” would yet be carried into the North. Elizabeth Hinsdale reported that when Sherman “cursed” southern women and blamed them for the war, he fueled “the general feeling that the time is not far off when they [the Yankees] will be punished.”<sup>48</sup>

Moral outrage in the face of such barbarous behavior could serve to reunite a fractured population and engender a new commitment to the Confederate cause. In the wake of Sherman’s forces, a Fayetteville woman wrote

terrible has been the storm that has swept over us. After destroying everything we had . . . one of these barbarians had to add insult to injury by asking me

47. Crabtree, *Journal of a Secesh Lady*, 677; Pepper, *Personal Recollections*, 333; Pvt. Charles S. Brown to “My Dear Etta,” Apr. 26, 1865, Charles S. Brown Papers, DUL; Spencer, *The Last Ninety Days of the War in North Carolina*, 61.

48. Janie Smith to Janie Robeson, Apr. 12, 1865, typed transcript in Mrs. Thomas H. Webb Papers, CDAH; Elizabeth Hinsdale to “My darling child,” Mar. 23, 1865, Hinsdale Family Papers, DUL; James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 23.



“what I would live upon now?” I replied “upon patriotism: I will exist upon the love of my country as long as it will last, and then I will die as firm in that love as the everlasting hills.”<sup>49</sup>

This moral economy of war would soon shape the social responses to peace and the memories of causes lost and won.

As news came of Lee’s surrender, devastated Confederate women mourned his demise as they would the loss of a family member. Catherine Edmondston grieved for the “noble old man . . . [who] has been neither out maneuvered or out generated but *crushed*, crushed by mere *brute force*.” In her diary she asked herself what would now sustain her? “I believe it is faith in the country,” she answered. “Faith in the Cause, an earnest belief that . . . we cannot be defeated.” In a similar vein Elizabeth Collier admitted the South may have been “overpowered—outnumbered, but thank God we have not been whipped.” Despite their laments, however, the women soon learned that in a North Carolina farmhouse Gen. Joseph Johnston and Gen. William T. Sherman were meeting under a flag of truce.<sup>50</sup>

The negotiations for peace evoked disparate reactions broken along gender lines. A camaraderie sprang up among war-weary veterans. “How strange and how mysterious is the human heart,” wrote one Yankee officer, that erstwhile enemies, who had been prepared to kill one another, were now “brothers.” Soldiers were trading coffee and whiskey; some were fighting their battles over again. Female civilians had a different attitude. A Union captain commented that he had seen “ladies who would treat you to two moral hours’ bitter invective against the Yanks.”<sup>51</sup>

As Confederate women struggled to come to terms with the loss of their leader, their grief did indeed turn to anger. “How I do hate the very name Yankie,” wrote Nellie Worth as she sought divine retribution, praying that that North be rendered “one vast scene of ruin and desolation.” A Union soldier encountered a particularly bitter North Carolina woman who declared that she would not give a cup of water to a Yankee, even if he were dying.

49. Unidentified Woman from Fayetteville, North Carolina, Mar. 22, 1865, typed transcript in Mordecai Family Papers, SHC. David Potter, “The Nature of Southernism,” in *The South and the Sectional Conflict* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), 53.

50. Crabtree, *Journal of a Secesh Lady*, 695–96; Elizabeth Collier diary, Apr. 20, 1865, SHC.

51. Pepper, *Personal Recollections*, 403; Conyngham, *Sherman’s March*, 384.

After some conversation with the soldier she relented. "I would give you a cup of water to soothe your dying agonies," she told him, adding, "and as you are a Yankee I wish I had the opportunity to do so."<sup>52</sup>

Yet despite their involvement in the heart of the campaign and their understanding of the nature and ethics of warfare, these women soon became the appendages of heroic soldiers who had glorified themselves on the battlefield. The legacy of defeat mandated gendered methods of healing, but the growing disparity of reactions between women and men was in sharp contrast to the experiences of wartime, when many women had become central players in the arena of war with their own links to cause and comrades. In the postwar period soldiers could identify with one another, even across enemy lines, by mutual recognition of duty fulfilled; women were denied a similar sense of closure. Within a few years these virulent women who had confronted the enemy had become, in the words of a veteran Confederate general, worthy of "one virtuous name."<sup>53</sup>

And as their strength and determination became abstractions, funneled into symbolic roles of sacrifice, rather than a struggle for nation, or a moral economy of war, white women of the South became either victims or icons—namely what men fight for. This depoliticization of Confederate women's roles served multiple purposes. The first, and most immediate, was one in which women themselves were implicated. Despite numerous examples of white women's resistance to the enemy, postwar rhetoric made Yankee depredations even more outrageous by casting them as attacks on defenseless women and children. In the quest to win a moral victory, southerners frequently accused Yankees of violating manly codes by attacking an otherwise peaceful home front. William T. Sherman and his men were ideal targets for this accusation.

But the domestication of white women served another, much more insidious agenda, as elite white women of the South became entangled in the forces of racial and sexual control. In a world of emancipated blacks, white women played an essential role in ensuring racial purity. White southern men used the threat of black on white rape as a psychological tool to control the behavior of white women and to terrorize the black population. Thus the memory of the Civil War glorified the role of the white soldier, occluded

52. Nellie Worth to "My Dear Cousin," Mar. 21, 1865, in *When Sherman Came*, 261. OTC to Father, Apr. 21, 1865, quoted in Glatthaar, *The March to the Sea*, 72.

53. Gen. Wade Hampton to President Johnson, 1866, Ulysses R. Brooks Papers, DUL.

the role of blacks, and rendered white southern women victims of northern atrocities and potential victims of black rapists.<sup>54</sup>

The South constructed memories of war around symbols of Yankee barbarities, southern cavaliers, and virtuous ladies, obscuring individual strengths and frailties. The heroic defense of southern soil was portrayed as a male prerogative, while women were praised for their feminine qualities of sentimentality, patience, and endurance. Such rhetoric privileged self-sacrifice over self-assertion, and in the postwar world, as they took on the responsibility of restoring male honor and perpetuating racial purity, southern women became cultural guardians rather than the makers of nations and nationalisms.

54. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign against Lynching*, revised ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), xx; Martha Hodes, "The Sexualization of Reconstruction Politics: White Women and Black Men in the South after the Civil War," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* vol. 3, no. 3 (1993): 402–17.

## Redirecting the Tide of White Imperialism

### The Impact of Ida B. Wells's Transatlantic Antilynching Campaign on British Conceptions of American Race Relations

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*Sarah L. Silkey*

After decades of relegating Ida B. Wells to obscurity, historians have finally acknowledged her importance to the early civil rights and antilynching movements. Wells's role in the campaign against lynching, long underestimated, has been the subject of extensive study, including three full-length biographies and numerous shorter works. Historians have praised her innovative rhetorical attacks against the foundations of lynching culture and acknowledged Wells as a true contender, along with Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois, to fill the leadership gap left by Frederick Douglass's death in 1895. Nevertheless, two of Wells's most famous acts—her 1893 and 1894 British antilynching campaigns—have been downplayed by historians as publicity stunts that generated widespread public attention but did little to actually end lynching.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, Wells's campaigns in Britain initiated a dynamic and lasting transatlantic debate on the causes and consequences of lynching by redefining

This essay was made possible in part by the generous financial support of the Overseas Research Students Awards Scheme sponsored by Universities UK and a grant from the Arthur Miller Centre for American Studies.

1. Gail Bederman, "Civilization, the Decline of Middle-Class Manliness, and Ida B. Wells's Antilynching Campaign (1892–94)," *Radical History Review* 52 (Winter 1992): 5–30; Linda O. McMurry, *To Keep the Waters Troubled: The Life of Ida B. Wells* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), xiv; Patricia A. Schechter, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett and American Reform, 1880–1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 109.

the way in which the British public understood the nature of mob violence and American race relations. An understanding of this transatlantic debate is essential to properly assess Wells's influence and the extent of her British campaigns' success.

The effectiveness of Wells's British antilynching campaigns is easily misunderstood if evaluated solely in terms of the campaigns' direct impact on American audiences. While Mildred Thompson, Wells's first biographer, credits Wells with affecting American public opinion and influencing antilynching legislation, she is careful to point out, "The practice of lynching . . . was not eradicated." Linda O. McMurtry argues that although Wells's "success in bringing lynch law to the forefront of the nation's attention" rallied black support for her campaigns, Wells's "uncompromising attitude" and "need to be the leader" of the movements in which she participated ultimately led to "her failure to become a significant factor" in the ongoing battle against "the racial crises of the 1890s." Patricia Schechter's recent work pessimistically concludes that Wells banked on the wrong factors in her British campaigns—never achieving more than a symbolic victory in the ongoing struggle against lynching. Only David M. Tucker claims that Wells's campaigns had an effect—albeit a localized one—on lynching incidents; he concludes that Memphis community leaders took steps to discourage lynching as a direct response to the international scrutiny generated by Wells's campaigns.<sup>2</sup>

Historians offer few explanations for Wells's appeal with British audiences, and those that have been offered remain marginal components in their evaluation of her success. McMurtry highlights the titillating appeal of Wells's "frank discussions of violence and sex" that "bordered on pornography" for Victorian audiences. Schechter observes that, unlike British audiences, white Americans did not view Wells as "a fascinating exotic." She argues that this distinction—the loss of a special status—made it difficult for Wells to transfer her "credentials as a lady reformer in England" to American reform circles.<sup>3</sup> Ascribing Wells's celebrity in Britain to the Victorian appetite for titillating stories that combined sex and violence or to her "exotic" status in the homeland of white imperialism risks underestimating the significance of the trans-

2. Mildred I. Thompson, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett: An Exploratory Study of an American Black Woman, 1893–1930* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing, 1990), 66; McMurtry, *To Keep the Waters Troubled*, 219, 231, 243; Schechter, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett and American Reform*, 100–101; David M. Tucker, "Miss Ida B. Wells and Memphis Lynching," *Phylon* 32 (Summer 1971): 112–22.

3. McMurtry, *To Keep the Waters Troubled*, 216; Schechter, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett and American Reform*, 104.

atlantic networks she tapped and her influence in both Britain and the United States.

Wells's British campaigns comprised two elements: an overt attack that she led herself and a covert attack fought on her behalf by British supporters. As a young, single, outspoken, and controversial African American woman, Wells could not enter every British circle. She became notorious in the American South for claiming that a significant number of black men were lynched not for raping white women, but for engaging in consensual interracial relationships. Her scandalous May 21, 1892, editorial in the *Memphis Free Speech* warned, "Nobody in this section of the country believes the old threadbare lie that Negro men rape white women. If Southern white men are not careful, they will over-reach themselves and public sentiment will have a reaction; a conclusion will then be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women." Her statements were deemed so offensive that an angry mob threatened her life and dismantled her newspaper.<sup>4</sup> Although the British public was less invested in defending the virtue of southern white women, these issues were inflammatory. Wells needed a way to introduce her ideas without alienating British audiences.

While she strove to gain publicity as the public face of a transatlantic antilynching movement, Wells recruited British supporters to introduce her ideas into conservative forums from which she was herself excluded. In this way she managed to get her arguments against lynching featured in mainstream and conservative British journals. Making full use of her networking skills, Wells's British antilynching campaigns mobilized a vibrant alliance of British reformers who pressured American religious, political, and reform leaders to end lynching.

Due to the nature of this dual strategy, it is impossible to gauge the impact of Ida B. Wells's British antilynching campaigns on the United States without first evaluating their impact on Great Britain. Only by assessing the extent to which Wells's rhetoric penetrated British circles can we measure the transfer of those ideas from Great Britain to the United States. This, in turn, calls for a closer examination of the transatlantic networks—political, social, and reform—that existed in Wells's day.

From the mid-1880s until Wells's 1893 and 1894 campaigns, British public discussions of lynching commonly assumed that lynching was an act of

4. McMurtry, *To Keep the Waters Troubled*, 146–48. For Wells's personal account of the incident, see Alfreda M. Duster, ed., *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 61–67.

“frontier justice” committed by isolated communities that lacked access to an effective legal system. British authors relayed their encounters with lynch mobs as colorful adventure stories about rural American folkways. In one instance, A. H. Paterson told his British audience in an 1887 edition of *MacMillan’s Magazine* about his participation in a calm, confident lynch party, comprising the area’s most respected citizens, formed to protect their small western community from the threat of murderous anarchy. To British authors, lynching as “frontier justice” offered no moral ambiguity; frontier settlements required popular justice to impose law and order. Paterson was proud of the role he played in the lynching and defended lynching as a necessary expedient that maintained order in a fragile society.<sup>5</sup>

Some British observers, however, were aware that lynchings in settled areas were becoming ever more frequent. Thus, fears that lynching might undermine the judicial system and increase the chances of unjustly punishing innocent persons began to trouble them. Such fears appeared justified after the March 14, 1891, lynching of Italian nationals in a New Orleans prison. Local citizens, displeased with the verdict of a murder trial, broke into the city jail and murdered eleven Italian immigrants, six of whom had been acquitted but remained in custody awaiting trial on lesser charges. Sparking an international controversy and creating a diplomatic crisis between the United States and Italy, the New Orleans lynching shocked Great Britain. Authorities admitted that they had known the intentions of the lynchers but had made no attempt to stop the lynching. Claims by lynching apologists that extralegal violence maintained social order appeared ludicrous when that violence nullified the authority of a working judicial system.<sup>6</sup>

Despite threats and appeals from the Italian government for legal redress against the lynchers, the federal government washed its hands of the affair, maintaining it had no constitutional mandate to interfere in what was essentially a matter for the State of Louisiana. U.S. Secretary of State James G. Blaine provoked angry responses from the international community when he argued

5. A. H. Paterson, “Lynch Law,” *MacMillan’s Magazine* 55 (Mar. 1887): 342–50. Frontier justice was one of the early definitions of lynching that competed for acceptance in the United States. For a discussion of the evolution of American lynching definitions, see Christopher Waldrep, *The Many Faces of Judge Lynch: Extralegal Violence and Punishment in America* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002).

6. “Lynching in America,” *Chambers’s Journal* 7 (May 1890): 317–19; N. J. D. Kennedy, “Lynch,” *Juridical Review* 3 (July 1891): 216; “The Lynching Affair at New Orleans,” *Spectator* 66 (Mar. 21, 1891): 401.

that the murdered Italians had been afforded the same rights and privileges as any American citizen. Indignant British journalists derided the secretary's position, asking whether "liability to lynch law" should be considered "a right and privilege" that all foreign visitors must "enjoy."<sup>7</sup>

While the majority of British newspaper and journal articles expressed outrage, or at least disgust, with the impotence of the United States government to uphold even a semblance of legal order, a minority approved of the lynching. Citing interference by the Mafia in the original trial, some British authors concluded that the citizens of New Orleans were justified in bypassing the corrupted legal system and reasserting their authority. To reassure British travelers, some authors emphasized the alleged criminality of the lynch mob's victims. In a surprising twist, a small, outspoken group of British commentators chastised the mob for lynching the wrong people—they should have murdered the corrupt judge and jury instead!<sup>8</sup>

The controversy over the New Orleans lynching—and fears that British travelers might meet a similar fate—sparked an interest among British audiences in understanding what appeared to be the new nature of lynching in the United States. Articles attempted to explain the prevalence and nature of lynching in the South. For the first time in British journals, the "lynching for rape" scenario emerged, with its racist assumptions about the inherent criminality of black men. White southerners often excused mob violence by claiming that it was a necessary response to the rape of white women by black men. Lynching supposedly served the dual purpose of channeling community outrage into concrete action and protecting female victims from the humiliation of testifying in open court. As Joel Williamson observed, the early 1890s saw the rise of a "new fear, the fear of the Negro as rapist. . . . Whites began the practice of lynching as a reaction against the presumed threat of the black beast to white womanhood, but it soon became an appalling habit, applicable to a wide range of offenses, real or imagined."<sup>9</sup>

The *Spectator* briefly noted in a larger discussion of American lynching that mob violence was used in the South to punish black rapists. However, it questioned the value of lynching black men accused of assaults on white

7. Kennedy, "Lynch II—Its International Aspect," *Juridical Review* 4 (Jan. 1892): 46, 48.

8. "The Lynching Affair at New Orleans," 401; Kennedy, "Lynch," 217.

9. "Lynch Law," *Saturday Review*, May 30, 1891, 643; "The Lynching Affair at New Orleans," 402; Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 184.



women, insightfully arguing that “the only effect is that fear of [rape] has become the governing terror of the South.”<sup>10</sup> British authors who discussed retaliation as a motivation for lynching indicated that rape was merely one of several crimes that might prompt the formation of a lynch mob. Indeed, it was the confident assertion of the victim’s guilt and the outdated belief that vast areas of the United States lacked a secure, established legal system that justified American extralegal violence in the eyes of British authors.

Even after the appearance of the “lynching for rape” scenario, lynching was not discussed specifically as a racially motivated act of violence; British authors continued to believe that victims of mob violence were chosen for their criminal behavior, not their color. In an article for the *Juridical Review*, N. J. D. Kennedy identified various degrees of punishment employed by lynch mobs. Although the favorite punishment for “venial delinquencies” remained public flogging, he observed that more serious offenses were “sufficiently expiated by the accused being shot or hanged.” Finally, he noted, “Burning alive is usually reserved for negroes or Indians in cases where popular feeling is strongly excited” and at times would be “ingeniously combined” with the other punishments. While Kennedy’s analysis calmly described the torture and burning of African Americans, it did not suggest that these acts, collectively referred to as lynchings, were motivated by the race of the mob’s victim. Although black men might receive harsher treatment at the hands of the mob, British authors maintained it was their criminal behavior, not their race, that triggered lynchings.<sup>11</sup>

Ida B. Wells’s 1893 and 1894 British antilynching campaigns therefore challenged the assumptions of British journalists and sparked a new debate on American lynching. In response to the February 2, 1893, torture and burning of Henry Smith in Paris, Texas, Wells was invited to act as a spokesperson for a nascent British antilynching organization, the Society for the Recognition of the Brotherhood of Man (SRBM). Organized as a platform for issuing “protests against injustice or oppression anywhere,” the SRBM primarily drew its middle-class membership from the Society of Friends, the abolition movement, and various temperance organizations. Local branches, formed at Wells’s speaking engagements, supported the SRBM’s small central committee. Audience members were encouraged to pass antilynching resolutions and sign pledges to “make it our aim and study, as we have opportu-

10. “The Lynching Affair at New Orleans,” 402.

11. Kennedy, “Lynch,” 220.

nity, to secure to every member of the human family, FREEDOM, EQUAL OPPORTUNITY, AND BROTHERLY CONSIDERATION.”<sup>12</sup>

Still unsettled by the New Orleans controversy and stunned by the cruelty of the spectacle lynching in Texas, British audiences were primed to hear Wells's critique of American race relations. Wells accordingly seized a valuable opportunity to mobilize the remnants of the British antislavery and freedmen's aid associations by traveling to Great Britain on April 5, 1893, under the SRBM's umbrella. But Wells's hopes for creating a successful international antilynching campaign were crushed less than two weeks into her speaking tour, when a feud erupted between the SRBM's cofounders, Catherine Impey and Isabella Fyvie Mayo, over the presumed romantic intentions of a gentleman in the organization. As their private dispute became a public scandal, local SRBM branches were divided by their loyalties to the two founders. Unwilling to take sides in the dispute, Wells found herself stranded in Britain without a credible sponsor to promote her work.<sup>13</sup>

As a result, Wells failed to obtain personal interviews in the British press, provoke editorial responses to her message, or reach a broader British audience during her first campaign. Although famous for her biting rhetoric and fiery temper, neither was reflected in the formulaic accounts of her speeches that appeared in local papers. Perhaps deemed too graphic, her discussions of the cruelties of American lynching were often glossed over or omitted entirely in favor of her less contentious arguments about the injustices and humiliations of racial segregation. Despite the stifling nature of her relationship with the SRBM, however, Wells refused to distance herself from the organization lest she damage her credibility. After six frustrating weeks of agitation, Wells ended her campaign and returned to the United States.<sup>14</sup>

12. “Declaration Form of the Society for the Furtherance of the Brotherhood of Man,” in Society for the Recognition of the Brotherhood of Man (SRBM) Minute Book (1894), Anti-Slavery Society Papers, Bodleian Library of Commonwealth and African Studies at Rhodes House, Oxford University.

13. For Wells's description of the controversy between Impey and Mayo, see Duster, *Crusade for Justice*, 103–5, 109–11, 124. For a more detailed examination, see Sarah L. Silkey, “‘More Sinned against than Sinning’: Ida B. Wells and the Challenges of a Transatlantic Anti-Lynching Reform Movement” (master's thesis, University of East Anglia, 2001).

14. “Aberdeen—Lynch Law in America,” *Aberdeen Daily Free Press*, Apr. 25, 1893; “Lynch Law in the Southern States of America,” *Huntly Express*, Apr. 29, 1893; “The Negro Question in South America,” *Glasgow Herald*, May 3, 1893; Minutes of June 10, 1893, SRBM Minute Book (1893), Anti-slavery Society Papers.

Lured back to Britain for a second campaign in 1894 by a tentative truce between the founders of the SRBM, Wells quickly found herself caught once more amid her benefactors' heated conflict. This time, however, a more complete breakdown of SRBM networks allowed Wells to escape the oppressive confines of Impey and Mayo's narrow moral reform circles. She was free to make full use of her talents and intuition as an activist, and her second campaign sparked an explosion of British public interest in American lynching. Ultimately, Wells convinced the British public that lynching was a racially motivated act of brutality and oppression.

Early in this second campaign, Wells established a friendship that propelled her activism into the public spotlight. Rev. Charles F. Aked, a Baptist minister and leader of Liverpool's Pembroke Chapel, befriended Wells upon her return to England in early March 1894. After it became clear that she would be unable to rely upon the assistance of her original benefactors, Aked not only opened his home and congregation to Wells, he became one of her greatest supporters. While Wells conducted her speaking tour and courted the support of local newspapers, Aked lobbied for public support on her behalf among religious societies. His influence within the religious reform community was strong enough to convince the *Christian World*, Britain's leading religious newspaper, to promote Wells's campaign and to provide Aked with a forum to lobby in favor of a strongly worded antilynching resolution passed at the Baptist Union of Great Britain's annual meeting in London. Aked publicized similar resolutions and letters of sympathy in the *Christian World* from the Unitarian and Congregationalist annual meetings, the Women's Yearly Meeting of the Society of Friends, and the British Women's Temperance Association.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the coverage of Wells's campaign in the *Christian World*, secular British journals remained reluctant to join the emerging public debate. Wells needed a new strategy. Victorian journals often commented on, reprinted, or responded to articles printed in other publications. If her message could break into even one respected journal, it might significantly fuel the transatlantic debate. Wells gambled on the strength of Aked's reputation to introduce her antilynching arguments covertly into middle-class British journals.

In June 1894, the *Contemporary Review* published an article by Aked entitled "The Race Problem in America," in which he combined his own expe-

15. "A Sermon on Ibsen," *Christian World*, Mar. 15, 1894, 187; Charles F. Aked, "Lynch Law Rampant," *Christian World*, Apr. 12, 1894, 259; "Lynch Law in America," *Christian World*, Apr. 19, 1894, 287; "Negro Lynching in America," *Christian World*, May 3, 1894, 334; Charles Aked, "One Woman's Work," *Christian World*, July 19, 1894, 545.

riences of American lynching with Wells's rhetorical arguments. On the subject of mob violence, Aked reiterated many of her statistics about the extent of lynching and repeated the assertion that mob violence was both increasing and spreading. He repeated Wells's accounts of the lynching of women and children, debunking lynchers' claims that they were retaliating against rapists. Asserting that only one-third of lynch victims were accused of "criminal assaults," he cited her evidence of the consensual relationships that led to some of these rape charges. "The demand of the negro is for the most elementary justice," he stated. Quoting Wells without naming her, he then went on to declare: "Make your laws as terrible as you like against that class of crime; devise what tortures you will; inflict death by any means you choose; go back to the most barbarous punishments of the most barbarous ages if you think you must; but prove your criminal a criminal first. Hang, shoot, roast him, if you will—if American civilisation demands this—but give him a trial first!"<sup>16</sup>

Significantly, Aked failed to acknowledge his use of Wells's rhetoric and ideas. Their mutual respect and close working relationship, plus the fact that Wells later named her firstborn son after Aked, indicate that he was not attempting to plagiarize Wells's work. Instead, it would seem, Aked lent his name, reputation, and white British male identity to give credibility to Wells's ideas, thus defusing controversy and bringing her arguments before an audience that would not have heard them otherwise.<sup>17</sup>

Free to examine lynching without discussing or supporting Wells, both the *Spectator* and the *Economist* published articles denouncing lynching in response to Aked's *Contemporary Review* article. Wells's rebranded arguments against lynching resonated with both publications. The *Spectator* asserted that there was "no room for doubt" of the truth of Aked's indictment of lynching. The *Spectator* reflected that the only reason that could "account for

16. The phrase *criminal assaults* was often used by journalists and public speakers to refer to sexual assault. Although its meaning could range from inappropriate sexual advances to rape, the term was most often interpreted by audiences as the latter. Charles F. Aked, "The Race Problem in America," *Contemporary Review* 65 (June 1894): 823–25, 827; Aked refines a quotation originally given by Wells in a personal interview: "Lynch Law in America," *London Daily Chronicle*, Apr. 28, 1894.

17. Wells's arguments appear in Ida B. Wells, "Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases," in *Southern Horrors and Other Writings: The Anti-Lynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1892–1900*, ed. Jacqueline Jones Royster (1892; reprint, Boston: Bedford Books, 1997), 61–62; Wells, "Lynch Law," in *The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition* (1893; reprint, with introduction by ed. Robert W. Rydell, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 30–33.

the determination of the white population of the South not to allow negroes to take their trial, is the race-feeling that what is good enough for the white man is too good for the black man." Although the *Spectator* asserted that such white supremacist beliefs were immoral and unfounded, the *Economist* labored to denounce lynching while reaffirming its support of white supremacy. "Be it understood that we do not write as friends of the negro. The equality of the races does not exist." Nevertheless, although blacks should be subordinated, they should not be subjected to "capricious and insulting cruelty." The *Economist* did "not ask good Americans to interfere for the sake of the negro, but for that of their own countrymen, who cannot be good Republicans with Lynch Law in their midst."<sup>18</sup>

Clearly, any journal that would go to such lengths to assert the validity of white supremacy would not knowingly support the arguments of a controversial black woman. We may assume, therefore, that without Aked's efforts to disguise Wells's antilynching rhetoric as his own work, neither the editor of the *Economist* nor that of the *Spectator* would have been inspired to condemn lynching. In fact, the *Spectator* continued to enthusiastically denounce American lynchings until W. McKay, a lynching apologist from Macon, Georgia, sent a letter to the editor accusing the *Spectator* of supporting Wells's campaign. "Credulity appears to be epidemic in England at present. . . . This is proved by the success of the Ida Wells Crusade, and the unmistakable evidence we have that any contradiction of her false statements will not be even considered. Your article about lynching . . . was evidently based upon this state of feeling, and your usually calm and considerate judgment of men and things was certainly under eclipse."<sup>19</sup>

Stung by allegations of bias and gullibility, the *Spectator* quickly backpedaled from its outspoken criticism. Quietly siding with Wells's facts, the *Spectator* stated that "making every allowance for exaggeration and misrepresentation, there remains a substantial mass of testimony. . . . The case for the outraged negro is a strong one"; nevertheless, the *Spectator's* editor now believed that British interference in what essentially amounted to an American domestic issue was wholly unwarranted. Such a quick reversal suggests that, had the *Spectator* been aware that its editorial stance against lynching would be viewed by its American readership as support for Wells's campaigns, it would not have engaged so enthusiastically in the debate. Yet, while the

18. "Lynch-Law in America." *Spectator* 72 (June 2, 1894): 743–44; "The Lynching of Negroes in America," *Economist* 52 (June 2, 1894): 664.

19. W. McKay, letter to the editor, "Lynching in Georgia: A Correction," *Spectator* 73 (July 28, 1894): 111.

*Spectator* might have viewed Aked's article as deceptive, Wells's message had finally broken into mainstream British journals.<sup>20</sup>

While Aked covertly pushed Wells's message into British journals, Wells used her experience in journalism to cultivate editors of British newspapers. The press responded with renewed coverage of her activism and granted Wells her sought-after personal interviews. When she finally made her mark as a minor celebrity, it was as the public face of the antilynching movement. No longer hindered by her sponsors' heated conflict or forced to temper her rhetoric to appeal to Impey and Mayo's strict sense of propriety, Wells revealed herself as a strong and independent crusader against injustice.<sup>21</sup>

Wells seized the opportunity to direct her interviews so as to highlight the brutality of lynching. For the first time, newspapers described Wells's accounts of the shocking cases of cruelty and torture committed by lynch mobs against women and children. She told of a woman wrongly accused of poisoning her employer who was "dragged out of gaol, every stitch of clothing torn from her body, and . . . hanged in the courthouse square in sight of everybody." A black man who refused to confess to the murder of a local white man was forced to watch as a mob hanged first his son and then his young daughter. The ingenuity and cruelty of lynch mobs, she declared, "can scarcely be believed." In Texas, a "mob laid hold of" a woman accused of poisoning,

took a barrel into which they drove nails and spikes, thrust her in and fastened her in, then rolled the barrel down the hill. After half a mile of this rolling, the mob howling furiously after the barrel as it bumped down the hill and men vieing with each other to give it a kick as it rolled, they knocked it open again, dragged off the spikes a mass of ragged skin and bones and bloody clothes, hanged it—for there was little semblance to a human being then—upon a tree and shot it as it hung.<sup>22</sup>

Wells took a great risk by bringing the terrible reality of lynching into British homes through the pages of the morning newspapers. For a young, single woman of good standing to publicly recount such horrific stories in Victorian society was inherently scandalous. Even though the task sickened

20. "Lynching in America and English Interference," *Spectator* 73 (Aug. 11, 1894): 169.

21. For examples of renewed coverage, see "Black versus White," *Labour Leader*, May 12, 1894; "Lynch Law in America," *London Daily Chronicle*, Apr. 28, 1894; "Miss Ida B. Wells," *London Sun*, May 31, 1894.

22. "Lynch Law in America," *London Daily Chronicle*, Apr. 28, 1894 (quotations); "Lynching in the United States," *Newcastle Daily Leader*, Apr. 20, 1894; "Miss Ida B. Wells," *London Sun*, May 31, 1894.

her, Wells insisted that she had no choice. The dire state of American race relations compelled her to testify.

It is frightful . . . that I should have to discuss such things as these. But my people are being flayed, scourged, hanged, shot and burnt, and the sympathy of the world is being turned aside by the hideous charge that we are a bestial race, in whose presence womanhood is never safe, nor childhood sacred, that our men are unclean brutes, into whose vile nature even fire cannot burn respect for law, and shall I not tell the world the truth?

As long as American Christians remained silent, Wells believed, the moral power of Great Britain remained the last hope of African Americans seeking to escape unjust persecution. "America will not listen to us. She despises us as an inferior race. . . . But she will be obliged to listen to a nation which she owns as her equal, if not her superior."<sup>23</sup>

Through personal interviews, networking with newspaper editors, and hard-fought correspondence battles against lynching apologists, Wells won the editorial support of an increasing number of British newspapers. After weighing her testimony, the *Bradford Observer* determined that "there seems to be nothing irrational or impossible in the plea that [African Americans] ought not to be branded and burned alive and rolled in nailed casks, or even hanged on a tree, at the whim and sport of a mob." The *Newcastle Daily Leader* sneered at America's "boasted forwardness in civilisation," which in reality amounted to a "chamber of horrors" for African Americans. The *London Daily Chronicle* did not pull punches in its denunciation of the South. The editor deemed that

race prejudice, and even a slight mixture of cruelty, is one thing; the horrible tortures, not only described by Miss Wells, but admitted and almost gloried in by the Southerners themselves, are quite another. When we read of such atrocities, we ask ourselves whether the Southern States are really fitted for self-government; whether the people who outrage the most elementary rights of humanity are fitted to be fellow-citizens of the same commonwealth with the descendants of the Pilgrim Fathers.

Such powerful endorsements from British newspapers increased public sympathy for Wells's campaigns, brought her message to a wider British audience, and fostered the emerging transatlantic debate on lynching.<sup>24</sup>

23. "Lynch Law in America," *London Daily Chronicle*, Apr. 28, 1894.

24. Editorial, *Bradford Observer*, May 11, 1894; "Lynching in the United States," *Newcastle Daily Leader*, Apr. 20, 1894; editorial, *London Daily Chronicle*, Apr. 28, 1894.

The growing currency of antilynching reform and Wells's passionate appeals for outside intervention inspired the formation of a second, independent British antilynching organization, the London Anti-Lynching Committee, on June 5, 1894. Through letter-writing campaigns, the committee maintained pressure on American governors to investigate lynchings committed in their states. It also sent a delegation to the United States to investigate American lynching and race relations. The committee attracted the support of several distinguished Englishmen, including Sir John Eldon Gorst, Member of Parliament Justin McCarthy, and the Duke of Argyll. Although the committee remained in sympathetic contact with Wells, it did not promote her campaign directly or coordinate its actions with her sponsors in the Society for the Recognition of the Brotherhood of Man. Catherine Impey approached leaders of the committee shortly after its formation to discuss a possible merger with the SRBM. While they desired to maintain a friendly and cooperative relationship, the committee's leadership chose to remain independent of Impey and Mayo's squabbling organization. Although the committee maintained an official distance from Wells's campaign, its activities provoked harshly worded rebukes from several American political leaders, including Alabama governor Thomas Goode Jones (1890–1894) and Arkansas governor William Meade Fishback (1893–1895). Undaunted, the committee continued pressuring American leaders to end lynching well into 1895.<sup>25</sup>

Local British communities were inspired to take action after hearing Wells speak. Members of London's Eccleston Square Church sent a petition to the American ambassador to Great Britain "asking him to use his best efforts with the American authorities to put a stop to the terrible atrocities practised in the Southern States." The ambassador's private secretary, Lloyd C. Griscom, reassured the congregation that the ambassador "shares fully your abhorrence of cruelty and injustice in all its forms and everywhere, and will be very glad to use any influence he may possess to secure every human being a fair trial before condemnation or punishment."<sup>26</sup> Although the embassy's

25. Florence Balgarnie, "The Story of Miss Ida B. Wells," *Great Thoughts of Master Minds*, Mar. 16, 1895, 386; "An Anti-Lynching Committee," *Fraternity*, Oct. 1894, 7; Society for the Recognition of the Brotherhood of Man, "Annual Report 1894, including Ida B. Wells's Summary of her Anti-Lynching Campaign in England" (Society for the Recognition of the Brotherhood of Man, London, 1894), 6; editorial, *The Times* (London), Oct. 6, 1894; William M. Fishback to Anti-Lynching Committee of England, Nov. 8, 1894, John Franklin Crowell Papers, Columbia University.

26. J. Hiles Hitchens, letter to the editor, *London Daily Chronicle*, June 6, 1894 (first quotation); Lloyd C. Griscom to Hitchens, May 29, 1894, reprinted in Hitchens, letter to the editor, *London Daily Chronicle*, June 6, 1894 (second quotation).



response was carefully worded to avoid condemning any single section of the United States, an important American diplomat had officially taken a position against lynching. Such actions might appear small, but when combined with other local efforts, their cumulative power became substantial.

Wells was an astute campaigner. Although she could have severed her ties completely with the squabbling founders of the SRBM, she persevered in the face of difficult circumstances. Rather than rely on its crippled national structure, she turned to the organization's local branches. The Bristol branch provided Wells with funding for her campaign, arranged a reception in her honor, and distributed over one thousand copies of English newspaper articles critical of American lynching to influential persons throughout the United States. The West of England branch also donated funds to Wells's campaign and distributed more than eighteen thousand copies of *Fraternity*, the SRBM's official publication, worldwide. The efforts of local branches of the SRBM to ensure that the publicity Wells's campaign received in the British press reached American religious, social, and political leaders applied widespread, direct moral pressure that Wells could not have accomplished alone.<sup>27</sup>

By the end of May 1894, British newspapers had begun to report on the impact in America of Wells's campaign. According to the *London Daily Chronicle*,

Miss Ida B. Wells, the young coloured lady who is conducting in England such a plucky campaign for the rescue of her people from the brutalities of the Southern States of America . . . seems to be accomplishing by her indirect attack what direct efforts have hitherto failed to effect. Some of the American papers have noticed the comments of the British Press with great magnanimity. . . . Miss Wells may congratulate herself that her gallant efforts are already bearing this fruit, and that her words are already echoing from continent to continent.

The *Anglo-American Times*, a British newspaper devoted to American issues, took notice in mid-June:

The role this coloured lady is playing is producing an effect in America, but Americans can never be persuaded that an ordinary gathering of Englishmen

27. "Miss Wells's Second English Trip," *Fraternity*, Aug. 1894, 4; Minutes of May 3, 1894 and June 8, 1894; Society for the Recognition of the Brotherhood of Man, Minute Book (1894); Society for the Recognition of the Brotherhood of Man, "Annual Report 1894," 9–10.

really understand and know anything about their country. This remark is made by an American journal:—"Judging by the resolutions adopted at some of her meetings, there are Englishmen who believe that Judge Lynch is a member of the Supreme Bench."

Yet every American protest against English ignorance or interference demonstrated the power of British moral authority in American culture. Wells's supporters were passionate in their disapproval; one even pronounced, "Every time the blood of an untried coloured person flows the American flag is trailed along the dust of criminality." It became increasingly difficult for the American press and political leaders to ignore the flood of condemnation that rose higher after each of Wells's speaking engagements.<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps the most impressive evidence that Wells's rhetorical arguments influenced the British public debate on lynching is the fact that several journals accepted the existence of consensual relationships between black men and white women and acknowledged the possibility that such relationships might lie at the heart of rape accusations in some cases of lynching. Of all Wells's assertions, this was the most divisive, for it attacked the Victorian image of white women as the embodiment of chastity and moral purity. Wells was acutely aware of the power and volatility of this issue; her editorial on that very topic had prompted a furious Memphis mob to destroy her newspaper. Fearing for her life, Wells had been forced into permanent exile from the South. By repeating the accusation that such consensual relationships existed, the British press granted Wells a major victory.<sup>29</sup>

The waves of social indignation created by the second antilynching campaign rippled back to the United States. Wells's arguments and criticisms penetrated deep into the South—into states where she could no longer safely travel. But this tide of British moral indignation did not go unanswered. American religious, social, and political leaders, as well as private citizens, joined in the growing transatlantic debate. An examination of Georgia governor William J. Northern's (1890–1894) acerbic reaction to Wells's activism illustrates the power and importance of this new debate on lynching.

A devout Christian and president of the Southern Baptist Convention, Northern fought to establish government policies and legal penalties to combat

28. Editorial, *London Daily Chronicle*, May 29, 1894 (first quotation); *Anglo-American Times*, June 16, 1894 (second and third quotations); J. Moffat Logan, untitled, *Freeman*, June 15, 1894, 396 (fourth quotation).

29. "Negro Lynching in America," 334; Aked, "Race Problem," 826–27; Balgarnie, "Miss Ida B. Wells," 385.

lynching and mob violence. From his first address, Northen advocated an improved public school system, property protection for individuals and corporations, and more rapid convictions in the criminal justice system to reduce mob violence. He feared that lynch law directly threatened Georgia's economic development by perpetuating images of the South as a lawless, violent, and uncivilized region. Such images deterred outside investors, and Georgia's economy, hit hard by economic depression and agricultural failures, desperately needed to attract new capital.<sup>30</sup>

Northen had been warned by friends that "the colored problem" was used by northern and British land developers to direct capital and immigration away from the South in favor of investments in the West. A visiting Englishman explained: "The excitement of immigration has to be kept up, or values will tumble. . . . Immigration must not be diverted south, or anywhere else, until those interests in the west shall have saved themselves." Northen believed these capitalist consortiums employed speakers like Wells to turn people against the South. "[T]he business of slandering the southern people, of impeaching their civilization," was, according to Northen, well organized.

Innocent, but meddlesome, people . . . are artfully called together to listen to a speaker. Typewritten resolutions are ready, with a couple of talkative men primed to second them. They are passed with a rush, and that same night's mail bears printed copies of them to all parts of the country, whence emigrants are likely to go to America. They were not only typewritten in advance but printed in advance. By a curious coincidence it will be discovered that many of the recipients of such resolutions as these received by the same mail gorgeously printed maps and circulars describing the west as home for intending emigrants.<sup>31</sup>

Northen needed to develop an effective response to outside criticism of Georgia's moral and economic stability; the state's future, he believed, depended upon its ability to win corporate investors in a competitive international market. Northen endeavored to answer British attacks by promoting Georgia

30. David F. Godshalk, "William J. Northen's Public and Personal Struggles against Lynching" in *Jumpin' Jim Crow: Southern Politics from Civil War to Civil Rights*, ed. Jane Dailley, Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, Bryant Simon (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 141–42; William J. Northen, *To the General Assembly of Georgia: Inaugural Address of Gov. Wm. J. Northen* (Atlanta: Southern Cultivator and Dixie Farmer, 1890).

31. "'Tis Miss Ida," *Constitution*, July 28, 1894, clipping, Northen Papers, box 5, vol. 4, p. 19, Georgia State Archives.

to the world as a state with unsurpassed positive labor relations and strong protection for the life and property of its citizens and corporations.

Northen's goals could not be achieved, however, without establishing a strong legal and political stance against lynching. Initially, he tried to end lynching by offering rewards for the successful capture and prosecution of mob participants. The *Elbert County Star* endorsed Northen's antilynching stance arguing, "Capital that has been invested in land in Georgia is quietly being withdrawn from the state" by the prevalence of lynching. "The laws of God, morality and peace are against it, but to appeal to our common sense and interests, it is for the good of the community and the county and the country at large to listen to the sage advice of our Christian governor."<sup>32</sup> While Northen's program was politically popular and won editorial support, it met with little practical success. Georgia communities remained unwilling to break the wall of silence that shielded lynchers from prosecution.

In August 1893, however, the determination of Montgomery County sheriff George W. Dunham to prevent the lynching of three black men accused of murder provided Northen with a successful model upon which to base new antilynching legislation. After defeating one mob attack on his prisoners' lives by recruiting a conference of Methodist ministers to calm the menacing crowd, Dunham had safely lodged the men in a distant Savannah jail and negotiated a special session of court in order to expedite their trials. However, as their court date neared, rumors spread that a second mob attack was being organized. Dunham accordingly wrote to Governor Northen claiming, "I have it from good authority [the prisoners] will be taken from me and linched some where" along the railway line back from Savannah. Despite Dunham's pleas for Northen to "send me 15 or 20 State Troops to protect myself and them," Northen refused, reminding Sheriff Dunham, "You have the authority to summon a sufficient posse to enable you to protect them."<sup>33</sup>

While Northen's reluctance to intervene seemed inconsistent with his antilynching position, it was a strategic decision. If Dunham were successful at defending his prisoners without the intervention of the state, he would provide a clear example of the standard that should be expected of every

32. "Lynch Law and Capital," *Elbert County (Georgia) Star* (c. June 1893), clipping, Northen Papers, box 5, vol. 3, p. 70.

33. "Dunham Commended by the Governor," clipping, Northen Papers, box 5, vol. 3, p. 71; George W. Dunham to Northen, Aug. 21, 1893, Northen Papers, box 1, folder 7 (first and second quotations); Northen to Dunham, Aug. 24, 1893, Northen Papers, box 1, folder 7 (third quotation).

sheriff in Georgia when mob violence threatened. Dunham had already proven his creativity and assertiveness in the initial confrontation with the mob. If he managed to bring the accused prisoners to trial, gain a speedy conviction, and complete their legal execution, he could be held up as a role model throughout the South.

Ironically, the possibility that the accused might be innocent of the charges never entered into Northen's deliberations. Northen, like many southern leaders, attempted to maintain law and order by substituting judicial murder for mob violence. By "making the criminal justice system more efficient," government officials hoped to deliver "punishment so swiftly that no 'lynching' need occur." As Christopher Waldrep observed, giving all-white, all-male juries the power to put rape defendants to death seriously blurred the line between lynching and legal execution. This tactic was famously dubbed "legal lynching" during the Scottsboro trials of the 1930s.<sup>34</sup>

By convincing the train engineer to skip the stop in the victim's hometown, Dunham passed by the waiting mob and safely delivered his prisoners to the courthouse. Following the prompt legal execution of the convicted murderers, Northen commended the sheriff for his "courageous and determined purpose in the enforcement of the law." Northen's praise revealed the significance of Dunham's efforts:

The action of Judge Smith in promptly calling a special term of the court to try these prisoners, coupled with your determined purpose as sheriff of the court, will be at least a suggestive policy which, if generally adopted, will secure certain punishment for the outrages against society, satisfy the people that justice will be meted out by the courts and remand into the hands of the law the punishment for crimes and thereby destroy all possible excuse for mob violence and awful lynchings in this state.<sup>35</sup>

The Georgia Assembly passed "An Act to Prevent Mob Violence," on December 19, 1893. Legally establishing the duty of law enforcement officials to protect prisoners and arrest mob participants, the new legislation permitted the use of deadly force in upholding the law. It authorized sheriffs to summon local citizens to assist in the defense of prisoners and made participation in a lynch mob a felony. The act also denoted criminal penalties for sheriffs or deputized citizens who neglected to faithfully perform their duties.

34. Waldrep, *The Many Faces of Judge Lynch*, 152, 163.

35. "Capital Chat," clipping, Northen Papers, box 5, vol. 3, p. 71.

Armed with a tough legal statute against lynching based on a proven model, Northen was ready to defend Georgia from moral criticism and lobby for foreign capital and immigration.<sup>36</sup>

The media impact of Ida B. Wells's 1894 British antilynching campaign could not have occurred at a better time for Northen. Although Wells's efforts brought unwanted attention to the problems of the South, the debate on lynching provided Northen with an opportunity to sell Georgia's new law-abiding image to an international audience of potential investors. Armed with antilynching legislation, countless press clippings about mob violence in the North, and a vigorous personal disdain for outside critics, Northen prepared to battle with the press in order to promote Georgia to the world. He directed his first attack against northern critics of the South: "These people up north keep hammering at us about the lawlessness at the South, and I expect to continue replying . . . by pouring some of their own rot into their own stomachs." In April 1894, Samuel J. Barrows, editor of the *Christian Register*, invited Northen to respond to an antilynching resolution from Richard A. Armstrong and the Hope Street Church in Liverpool, England, which had been inspired by Wells's campaign and endorsed by the Boston publication. Northen used the opportunity to question Wells's credibility and highlight numerous cases of lynching and mob violence that had recently occurred in the North. He argued that the North's record of mob violence was far worse due to the prevalence of labor riots, which resulted in countless deaths, while "in lynching only one man is murderously killed."<sup>37</sup>

Placing both regions on an equally immoral plane, yet painting the South as a land of harmonious labor relations, Northen tried to tempt businessmen who were tired of strikes and riots to move away from the North and invest in Georgia. Rebutting the *Christian Register's* accusation that "[p]eople will refuse to invest capital and to live in a country in which there is no adequate protection by law for life and property," he recounted the efforts of his administration to bring an end to lynching. He further charged the editor of the *Christian Register* to make amends for his indictment against Georgia by devoting the "entire paper during your natural life to advertising . . . my State as having the most 'adequate protection by law for life and property' in

36. "An Act to Prevent Mob Violence," Dec. 19, 1893, Northen Papers, box 3, folder 6.

37. Northen to Col. C. B. Howard, May 18, 1894, Northen Papers, box 2, folder 19 (first quotation); Samuel J. Barrows to William J. Northen, Apr. 16, 1894, Northen Papers, box 5, vol. 4, p. 13; Richard A. Armstrong, letter to the editor, "Lynch Law in America: An English Protest," *Christian Register*, Apr. 12, 1894, 227; Northen, "Lynching in the South," *Christian Register*, May 10, 1894, 291 (second quotation).

the Union, and therefore the best State in America 'to invest capital and to live in.'"<sup>38</sup>

Northen's article was punctuated with derogatory references to Wells and her antilynching campaigns. Rather than appreciating their common mission to stop mob violence, he portrayed her as a charlatan feeding off the naive sympathies of British reformers. Moreover, he denied that she had any personal knowledge of conditions in the South and claimed that if she had been witness to riots in Boston she "might pick stray quarters from sympathetic Englishmen by another pathetic lecture" and use the opportunity to obtain "a large increase of pin money if [she] could induce anybody to believe [her] statements."<sup>39</sup> By focusing attention anywhere but on problems in the South, Northen tried to deflect the censure roused by Wells's accusations.

Northen's piece ran more than five full columns but never discussed lynchings in Georgia or suggested any effective means of enforcing his new antilynching legislation, which could not succeed without the cooperation of the state's citizens. Meanwhile, a lynching occurred at the Greensboro jail despite the intervention of the local militia. Although the press praised Northen for offering a three hundred dollar reward for the arrest and prosecution of each participant, no one came forward to identify the lynchers. As long as communities like Greensboro remained silent, no antilynching legislation could be effective.<sup>40</sup>

Nevertheless, Northen's response to the *Christian Register* won public and private accolades. The *Banner* praised Northen's "Masterly Defense" of the South as the crowning achievement of "the best Governor that the state of Georgia ever had." The editor asserted that "nothing before has ever been said or published that so completely answered the implied charge that the white people of the South were not as good and as just in their treatment of the negro as the white people of the [N]orth." W. P. Turner, a Methodist Episcopal Church, South, missionary working in Japan, wrote Northen, "There ought to be a million copies of your letter printed in pamphlet form and sent to every preacher and editor in the North and in England. It would be worth more to the South and to Georgia especially, than all the efforts of the combined Governors of the South to invite capital and immigration into the South."<sup>41</sup>

38. Northen, "Lynching in the South," 291–92.

39. Ibid, 291.

40. Ibid, 291–92; "After the Lynchers," [*Constitution?*], [Apr. 21, 1894?], clipping, Northen Papers, box 5, vol. 3, p. 231.

41. "Masterly Defense," *Banner*, clipping, Northen Papers, box 5, vol. 4, p. 15; W. P. Turner to Northen, June 6, 1894, Northen Papers, box 2, folder 19.

Pleased with the reception of his tirade, and encouraged by his friends, Northen produced a pamphlet, *The Negro at the South: Letters by Gov. W. J. Northen*, containing unedited copies of letters addressed to the *Christian Register* and *Home Mission Monthly*, which he distributed to sympathetic newspaper editors and religious leaders. Turner requested that several copies be sent to him so that he might educate an English newspaper editor in Japan whose publications were trying his patience.<sup>42</sup>

Frustrated by outside criticism of the South, Northen wrote to encourage a sympathetic minister to review his *Home Mission Monthly* response in a Baltimore newspaper. It was time, he believed, to "take these people by the napes of their necks and shake them a little to let them know that we have some little resistance." He hoped that his actions would initiate a southern backlash that might quell outside criticism. If more people would "take up the fight that has been begun, I think we can at least put them at some disadvantage."<sup>43</sup>

Encouraged by the success of his *Christian Register* article, Northen decided to confront Wells's British supporters. In response to an April 28, 1894, editorial and interview with Wells, Northen wrote an indignant letter to the editor of the *London Daily Chronicle*, who had asserted, "It would need a firm upright Governor in any Southern State to protect a coloured man" from lynching where public sentiment favored mob violence. This time, rather than push his recent record for reform or highlight the immorality of the North, Northen chose to simply attack Wells's credibility. He argued that the British press should "rely upon more generally accepted authority for [their] information" than Wells's testimony and denied accusations that the people of the South were "unduly brutal and cruel above all nations."<sup>44</sup>

Although Northen claimed that he did "not feel called upon to reply to what Miss Ida B. Wells may say through [the British] papers," her accusations had clearly struck a nerve. In an editorial note, the *London Daily Chronicle* explained, somewhat generously, that it had printed Northen's letter unedited "with the exception of one brief paragraph, which the English law of libel, differing as it does from that of Georgia, forbids us from inserting." The editor viewed Northen's attacks on Wells's character as misguided when the South

42. Northen, *The Negro at the South: Letters by Gov. W. J. Northen* (Atlanta: Franklin Printing & Publishing, 1894); Turner to Northen, June 6, 1894, Northen Papers, box 2, folder 19.

43. Northen to William E. Hatcher, May 24, 1894, Northen Papers, box 2, folder 19.

44. Editorial, *London Daily Chronicle*, Apr. 28, 1894 (first quotation); Northen, letter to the editor, *London Daily Chronicle*, June 5, 1894 (second quotation).



had repeatedly indicted itself before the world: "The Press has literally teemed with accounts of the most brutal lynchings, which we cannot suppose were invented by newspaper agencies."<sup>45</sup>

While the actions of the lynch mobs were shameful, the editor also found Northen's behavior deserving of reproach; men of honor "should not permit themselves to attribute unworthy and sordid motives to a young negress who comes to this country to plead for her unfortunate fellow countrymen." The editor acknowledged receipt of Northen's pamphlet denouncing lynchings in the North, but he pointed out that even Northen did not deny that lynchings continued to occur in the South. "[T]wo blacks do not make a white, and the sole question to be decided is whether the alleged violation of all legal processes in certain districts is or is not true." In regions where honorable Christian men like Northen held strong white supremacist beliefs, the *London Daily Chronicle* concluded, "still stronger views will be common among the indifferent masses of the white population—the least progressive, least capable, section of the great American people. No wonder, therefore, that we hear of deeds in the Southern States which are a strain on their civilisation and an outrage on our common humanity."<sup>46</sup>

Wells viewed Northen's attacks on her character as a victory for her campaign, claiming, "Outside agitation has done some good even in the South, when the governor of the great State of Georgia comes forward to defend her."<sup>47</sup> Certainly his interest in, frustration over, and attempts to neutralize the debate demonstrate its importance and dynamic nature. Northen responded to Wells's activism directly because he viewed her work as a significant threat to both the prosperity of his state and his success as governor. While he might not have rejected traditional lynching narratives, Northen recognized that publicly supporting lynching at this historical moment could only deter economic investment and hinder southern progress. Whereas the benefits of protecting black prisoners from mob violence might not have seemed significant prior to 1894, the consequences of inaction suddenly became substantial. By bringing the issue of American lynching before audiences in Britain, Wells increased the political and economic stakes for American leaders who tolerated or condoned lynching.

45. Northen, letter to the editor, *London Daily Chronicle*, June 5, 1894 (first quotation); editor's note, *London Daily Chronicle*, June 5, 1894 (second and third quotations).

46. Editorial, *London Daily Chronicle*, June 6, 1894 (first and third quotations); editor's note, *London Daily Chronicle*, June 5, 1894 (second quotation).

47. Wells, letter to the editor, *London Daily Chronicle*, June 9, 1894.

Although the attempts of southern lynching apologists to rally conservative British opinion to their side gained some momentum toward the end of 1894, Wells's antilynching campaigns permanently altered the way in which the British public understood and discussed American lynching. Henceforth, British journalists discarded romantic notions of "frontier justice" and accepted Wells's assertions that lynching was a racially motivated act of violent oppression. It has yet to be determined exactly how this shift in understanding affected their American counterparts, but by June 1894, even the *Economist*, a conservative British periodical with white supremacist sympathies, concluded that "race hatred," not rape, remained at the heart of American lynching.<sup>48</sup>

Instead of viewing Wells's British antilynching activism as a failure simply because lynching persisted, we should recognize the massive impact her campaigns had on British public debates about lynching and race relations in the United States. In less than eighteen months, Wells had succeeded in mobilizing an extensive and vibrant network of British reformers, many of whom held close American associations through other transatlantic social, religious, and reform organizations. The combined efforts of her supporters undermined British allegiance with white southerners and increased sympathy for the plight of African Americans.

Ripples of social change spread across the Atlantic as British audiences remained keen to discuss and denounce lynching long after Wells left the British spotlight. From 1902 to 1905, for example, the central leadership of the British Society of Friends appointed a committee to investigate and agitate against American lynching. British interest in mob violence peaked again in 1910 when Booker T. Washington's controversial tour of England reignited the transatlantic debate. The perpetuation of the debate well into the twentieth century demonstrates the degree to which the British public embraced the issue of American lynching. No longer content with traditional lynching narratives, British audiences pressed white southerners to provide more satisfactory answers. Despite American resistance to outside criticism, this long-term scrutiny and the lingering threat of economic repercussions almost certainly fostered a social environment that became increasingly less tolerant of lynching.

48. "The Lynching of Negroes in America," 664.

## Unlikely Allies

### Southern Women, Interracial Cooperation, and the Making of Segregation in Virginia, 1910–1920

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*Clayton McClure Brooks*

In early-twentieth-century Virginia, a time and place of rampant racism and the solidification of Jim Crow, white and African American women frequently joined forces to confront social welfare concerns. The story of their efforts, largely overlooked by historians, offers a unique insight into the intricacies of the culture of segregation where white and black spaces were rarely clearly divided, only labeled at the whim of those in power. The most common interaction across the color line occurred daily within the confines of white homes. The experiences, however, of those women, black and white, who met in the public realm tell a different story. Those individuals came together not in the traditional roles of mistress and maid but to address concrete problems of health, housing, and citizen welfare that became increasingly acute as the new century brought further urbanization and industrialization to a region economically and politically ill equipped to deal with change. Interracial cooperation was motivated by separate agendas. White women desired to mold and strengthen the developing system of segregation in what they considered a socially responsible manner. African American women fought to retain what rights they could and claim a share of the state's limited public resources. Despite seemingly irreconcilable goals, these activists found it beneficial to cooperate on projects. In the past, historians have interpreted southern liberals during segregation as always, either overtly or unknowingly, undermining the racial order. While this was true for the African

Americans involved, the vast majority of whites involved in these efforts were unabashed white supremacists and dedicated defenders of Lost Cause ideology. Interracial cooperation, at least before the 1920s, reinforced rather than threatened segregation. A study of the initiatives and the Virginia public's response reveals a new interpretation of the building of a segregated South and the meaning of interracial cooperation before the civil rights movement.<sup>1</sup>

Both men and women, white and African American, participated in this cross-racial activism, yet the fact that women composed approximately half of this group in the era before woman suffrage is remarkable. Men typically held the top positions in organizations connected directly or indirectly with cooperation work, such as the Virginia Board of Charities and Corrections or the Negro Organization Society, and ran the major state newspapers, such as the white *Richmond Times Dispatch* or the African American *Richmond Planet*, that helped to shape the discussion of race relations. Women, however, became equally involved, working across the color line to found charities, raise money, and lobby state institutions when necessary. Although they always followed societal rules of "proper" racial behavior, white and black women found it easier to work together because white society saw their interaction as a natural replication of the mistress/maid relationship with none of the sexual undertones that would have been present with black women working with white men, or far worse, black men working with white women. Elsa Barkley Brown's research on southern African American women and Virginian Maggie Lena Walker, in particular, outlines these women's strategies for reform, concluding that they acted out of race-specific "womanist" motivations. A study of the cross-racial activism of black and white women, however, suggests that while African American women did act out of differing racial motivations than white women, their strategies and interests in terms of project goals contained more parallels than differences. Social reform work such as improved health care, sanitation, and child welfare fit within African American women's concern with racial uplift as well as white women's stated beliefs in noblesse oblige and maternalism.<sup>2</sup>

1. Early-twentieth-century southerners, black and white, used this exact term: *co-operation*. In the 1960s, the term *interracial cooperation* developed connotations of liberal acts undermining the racial foundations of southern society, segregation in particular. However, I have chosen to retain the wording because it was the language used during the period in question. Contemporary southerners spoke frequently of such acts of "co-operation." My only alteration is to modernize the spelling by removing the hyphen.

2. Elsa Barkley Brown, "Womanist Consciousness: Maggie Lena Walker and the Independent Order of Saint Luke," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14 (Spring 1989): 610–33; Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics*

The building of a Jim Crow culture stymied Virginia's social and economic development in countless ways, but, ironically, segregation created a public space where both white and African American female activists could gain influence and respectability. White progressives believed segregation and scientific classification of all citizens to be the most efficient methods of addressing social problems. They desired to broaden the definition of segregation, which they considered the greatest modern reform, in order to organize all individuals into neatly controlled societal niches. In terms of social welfare initiatives this meant dividing Virginians into four subsets: white men, white women, black men, and black women. Whenever possible, separate state institutions, particularly reformatories, were established for each group. Even in institutions that combined men and women (divided by race), the two sexes were separated and were administered under differing guidelines. In a state deeply concerned with budget shortfalls, these divisions increased costs. Separating women from men, however, created opportunities for women interested in public welfare work. The segregation of races necessitated interracial communication to make the system function. Although taking on seemingly nontraditional roles for women in a male-dominated realm, female reformers of both races claimed for themselves a unique feminine space for public work and interracial dialogue by supporting and promoting facilities and charities that served women.<sup>3</sup>

In large part, interracial cooperation work in Virginia before 1920 entailed whites' attempts to include African Americans in contemporary reform initiatives. White activists motivated by the Progressive creed began working

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of *White Supremacy in North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 93, 101, and 148; Marjorie Spruill Wheeler, *New Women of the New South: The Leaders of the Woman Suffrage Movement in the Southern States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); and Linda Gordon, *Pitied but Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare, 1890–1935* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994); Histories of the Virginia Board of Charities and Corrections and Negro Organization Society and similar organizations tended to be written from the male perspective. For example see Arthur W. James, *Virginia's Social Awakening: The Contribution of Dr. Mastin and the Board of Charities and Corrections* (Richmond, VA: Garrett & Massie, 1939).

3. May 14, 1919 Report to Westmoreland Davis, Board of Charities and Corrections minutes, Board of Charities and Corrections Papers, Accession 28142, Library of Virginia (hereinafter Board Papers); Virginus Dabney, *Virginia: The New Dominion, A History from 1607 to the Present* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 435. For more detailed accounts of the development of segregation in Virginia, see Andrew Buni, *The Negro in Virginia Politics, 1902–1965* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1967); and J. Douglas Smith, *Managing White Supremacy: Race, Politics, and Citizenship in Jim Crow Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

toward better schools, hospitals, tuberculosis sanitariums, mental asylums, orphanages, penitentiaries, and reformatories, among other public welfare concerns. White reformers soon realized that the causes they had embraced with such fervor could also be used to further entrench the relatively new Jim Crow culture. While many white Virginians abhorred the idea of any public aid benefiting the black race, the whites who advocated and promoted the initiatives saw the advantages of extending privileges across the race line. They believed, paternalistically, that this work would not only help what they considered a “childlike” race, but also give them greater control over the black “sphere” of Virginia society and satisfy their Progressive concern with order. A core group of white reformers, male and female, emerged in Virginia who, though often specializing in one particular cause, was involved to some degree in nearly every public welfare reform within the state. Leaders included Jackson Davis, Joseph Mastin, Walter Bowie, Mary Munford, Annie Schmelz, Adele Clark, Nora Houston, Orie Latham Hatcher, and Elizabeth Cocke.<sup>4</sup> Although none of these individuals questioned the morality of separation of the races or the tenets of white supremacy, they saw the value of including African Americans in their vision of a more “enlightened” and healthy Virginia. Believing in the justice of “separate but equal,” they insisted on the necessity of providing African Americans with quality public services and facilities and concluded that interracial cooperation was the best course for ensuring the success of segregation.

African Americans in Virginia rejected whites’ appraisal of the justice and righteousness of segregation, but nevertheless recognized the advantages of working with white reformers on cross-racial initiatives. Although few believed separate could ever be equal, black leaders tried to use this rhetoric to their advantage by encouraging whites to fulfill the promises of Jim Crow. These men and women, including T. C. Walker, Giles Jackson, John Mitchell Jr., Janie Porter Barrett, Maggie Lena Walker, Mary Burwell, Lillian Payne, and Ora Stokes, were pragmatists.<sup>5</sup> Idealistically, the motivations and goals of

4. J. Douglas Smith analyzes the connection between paternalism and white Virginians’ efforts to “better race relations” during the Jim Crow era in his monograph *Managing White Supremacy*. Mary Munford corresponded with many white Virginia activists concerning racial and nonracial issues. She also kept copies of many Virginia and national Commission on Interracial Cooperation meeting minutes, as well as business concerning the Community House for Colored People and the Richmond Urban League. See Mary Cooke Branch Munford Papers, Accession 28142, Library of Virginia.

5. Apart from personal papers, two of the best contemporary sources are John Mitchell Jr., *Richmond Planet*, 1884–1929; and Thomas Calhoun Walker, *The Honey Pod Tree: The Life Story of Thomas Calhoun Walker* (New York: John Day, 1958).

white and black reformers were diametrically opposed, but in practical terms the concerns of both groups meshed. All involved agreed on the benefits of a healthier, cleaner, and less violent society. Although the African American activists' work could not stem the tide of segregation, it did provide a forum to negotiate, even if from a disadvantaged position, the extent of inequality they would be forced to endure under Jim Crow.

Virginia offers an excellent backdrop for reevaluating cross-racial activism in the Jim Crow South. Neither the most liberal nor the most conservative of the southern states, the Old Dominion's race relations were generally characteristic of the region. The state's typicality was due, in part, to the presence of a number of committed activists involved in local and state projects who also had ties to regional and national interracial cooperation efforts. They played essential roles in shaping the nationwide discussion of race relations. Contemporary Virginians, however, believed their state was unique. Whites argued that race relations within the state were peaceful and harmonious, crediting disenfranchisement of African American voters and Jim Crow laws for the "stability."<sup>6</sup> Moreover, both races clung to the lingering ideal of Virginia as the "mother of states" and the epitome of gentility, a belief that grew stronger with the rise of Lost Cause sentiment. Although many of the First Families of Virginia no longer could claim the material riches they had possessed in the antebellum years, their surnames became of even greater social currency, lingering symbols of the state's former glory. White Virginians believed their privileged history prepared them better than all others to "handle" African Americans and maintain racial peace.

White Virginians' adoration of aristocracy and idealization of noblesse oblige were products of Lost Cause romanticizing of the antebellum era, an imagined past in which whites and their slaves had lived together as one large happy family in the "glorious" era of the pre-Civil War South. Lost Cause remembrance revived this lore in the early twentieth century, leading whites to profess the values of paternalism rhetorically central to the long-past slaveholding culture. Frequently, whites "reminisced" about their fami-

6. Richard L. Morton, "The Negro in Virginia Politics, 1865–1902" (Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 1918), 6; and Smith, *Managing White Supremacy*, 1–17. For more on the varied national activism of individuals see Mary White Ovington, *Portraits in Color* (1927; reprint, Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1971); E. D. Caffee, "Colored Richmond," *Crisis* (Jan. 1917): 124–27; Lucy Randolph Mason, *To Win These Rights: A Personal Story of the CIO in the South* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952); and Clayton McClure Brooks, "Proper Voices, Radical Words: Mary Johnston, Lucy Randolph Mason, and the Process of Racial Liberalization" (master's thesis, University of Virginia, 1999).

lies' experiences and relationships with loyal slaves. During a speech at the Hampton Institute where Booker T. Washington himself was educated, Walter Bowie, a Virginia activist, spoke of the time his grandfather was wounded at Gettysburg and praised the black man who carried him from the field "went with him in the ambulance . . . [then] took him out and stayed with him by the road, when he [his grandfather] could endure the agony of that jolting transit no longer." Appealing to the sentimentality of the whites in the audience as well as the goodwill of the African Americans present, Bowie concluded dramatically: "Such devotion only an ingrate could forget. . . . We, the white race, are bound to the Negro people by ties too deep and sacred to be severed . . . by the growing instinct of co-operation the Negro can be assured of that fairness of opportunity which will best build up the self-respect and the creative social values of the race." Bowie and his fellow reformers believed taking a paternalistic interest in the care of African Americans was not simply an act of charity to help their social inferiors, but a responsibility and burden to be carried in order to honor their heritage and ancestors. They felt a strong sense of duty not despite, but *because* of, their belief in white supremacy. While many whites, southern and northern, understood white supremacy as a reason for lynching and the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan, these white activists interpreted white supremacy as a justification for benevolence, not violence. In their minds, the color of their skin obligated them to be responsible for those they considered subordinate. "My only fear for white supremacy," one author reflected, "is that we should prove unworthy of it. . . . Supremacy is for service. It is suicide to thrust other races back from the good which we hold in trust for humanity."<sup>7</sup>

Although most twentieth-century whites no longer defended slavery, they still found beneficial uses in the doctrines of paternalism. They no longer deemed the household the center of paternalist care (at least not in regard to race), but instead regarded the African American race as a whole as the responsibility of the "master race." These whites claimed that their race's loving care of blacks had been rebuffed and betrayed during the "dark" days of Reconstruction, forcing many whites to abandon their racial obligations. Now, they argued, was the time for white southerners to reestablish themselves

7. Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890–1940* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 43–84; Walter Russell Bowie speech draft "Goodwill and Race Adjustment" written for Founder's Day at Hampton Institute 1926, Munford Papers (first and second quotations); and Lily Hardy Hammond, *In Black and White*. In *Race and the South: Two Studies, 1914–1922* (New York: Arno Press, 1972, orig. 1914), 89 (third quotation).



as the benefactors of the black race. Like their forefathers, they believed that African Americans could only advance successfully through white guidance. In addition, professions of “benevolence” could still be employed as a means of social control. White reformers used cross-racial activism to practice an updated modern conception of white paternalism.<sup>8</sup>

White Virginians’ lingering concern with their benevolent self-image shaped discussions of race; they prided themselves on their civility and practiced what is best labeled as “polite racism.” White radicals (extremists denying the possibility of any future for African Americans within the United States) occasionally spouted their beliefs in newspapers and other public forums, but the majority of white Virginians were conservatives who accepted the presence and recognized the benefits (often in the form of labor exploitation) of blacks as long as they remained in their social “place” as defined by the culture of segregation. Few individuals acted upon noblesse oblige and became involved in cross-racial activism, but they tended to be influential social leaders and members of prominent southern families. Many were also advocates of Progressive reform, which they interpreted as a modern extension of their noblesse oblige ideals.<sup>9</sup> Apart from the supposed goal of charity, paternalistic activism reinforced white reformers’ beliefs in white supremacy and Virginian aristocracy and offered the self-satisfaction of moral superiority. The activists’ persistence in keeping alive an at least rhetorical faith in paternalism helped to maintain a facade of harmonious race relations in the state.

Numerous black Virginia leaders attempted to use whites’ obsession with the concept of benevolence to their own advantage. John Mitchell, editor of the *Richmond Planet*, told his readers, “We need friends among the better class of white people and we should bend our energies to the task of obtaining them. One word in our favor from the lips of an influential white citizen will do us more good than a thousand words from another source.” The interracial cooperation movement in Virginia was based on this principle. Black leaders appealed to white leaders’ sense of paternalism for aid in resolving the needs of the black Virginians. They drew upon white politicians’ own

8. For more on the scope and meaning of antebellum paternalism, see Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972). For more on white Virginians’ lingering concern with paternalism in the twentieth century, see Smith, *Managing White Supremacy*.

9. Joel Williamson, *Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 255; Smith, *Managing White Supremacy*, 8; Edward L. Ayers, *Promise of a New South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); and William A. Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880–1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

rhetoric justifying segregation and reminded them of their promise of separate but equal. Black activists attempted to gain “equal” by appealing to whites’ code of gentility. “The Southern white man of principle, regardless of his party affiliations,” Mitchell argued, is “to be trusted by the colored people of the United States.” In reality, whites never lived up to their own promises of paternalism, primarily because they usually dictated rather than inquired how they could best serve African American needs. White Virginians’ concern with benevolence combined with African American appeals to these values, however, had the positive and real benefits of limiting outbreaks of racial violence. Whites knew that their paternalistic demonstrations and promises of interracial cooperation helped to minimize black challenges within the state. African Americans were not passive, but they saw greater opportunities in working within the white system. Thus, white Virginia leaders had little reason to be threatened by blacks while state and local governments were securely under conservative Democratic control. Instead, white leaders discouraged extralegal violence and stressed the necessity of civility and order in maintaining the delicate balance of race relations. As a result, Virginia had a significantly lower rate of racially motivated bloodshed than the states of the Deep South (Georgia, Mississippi, and South Carolina, for example). Lynchings after 1900 were rare. Legal executions, particularly of black men, were not uncommon, but white Virginians prided themselves on their ability to regulate racial disturbances within the confines of the law, providing at least an outward appearance of justice.<sup>10</sup> Although whites often failed to live up to the code they preached, black leaders found advantages in becoming among the most ardent and vocal supporters of paternalism.

Fewer public displays of hostility did not mean African Americans faced less discrimination in the state. The vast majority of white Virginians accepted white supremacy as a biblical fact, and paternalistic segregation proved a thin cover for the inequitable treatment of African Americans. Black Virginians faced rabid discrimination and intimidation at nearly every point in their lives. African Americans recognized the encroaching injustice and voiced their discontent. In the words of Richmond resident, banker, and social activist Maggie Lena Walker, “Hasn’t it crept into your minds that we are being more

10. John Mitchell, editorial comment, *Richmond Planet*, Apr. 6, 1912 (first quotation); John Mitchell, “A Bold Political Stroke,” *Richmond Planet*, Aug. 10, 1912 (second quotation); Smith, *Managing White Supremacy*, 156; Dabney, *Virginia*, 413, 483. For more on the racial dynamics of executions in twentieth-century Virginia, see Lisa Lindquist Dorr, “Black on White Rape and Retribution in Twentieth-Century Virginia: ‘Men, Even Negroes, Must Have Some Protection,’” *Journal of Southern History* 66 (Nov. 2000): 711–48.

and more oppressed each day that we live? There is a lion terrorizing us, preying upon us. . . . The name of this insatiable lion is PREJUDICE.” Walker and her counterparts agreed to work with whites and encourage whites’ professions of paternalism (often in a somewhat tongue-in-cheek manner) because they saw those efforts as one of the few opportunities of negotiation remaining.<sup>11</sup> They believed that the best way to fight discrimination was by working within the white-defined system.

Despite the limited bloodshed and professions of goodwill within the state, most white Virginians by the late 1890s believed that relations between the races had degraded considerably since the imagined harmonious days of the antebellum South and that codified segregation was the only way to ensure (and, in the eyes of some, to recapture) a peaceful racial coexistence. In 1901–1902, eleven years after a Mississippi constitutional convention cleared the way, white Virginians wrote and adopted a new state constitution disfranchising most African Americans as well as a number of lower-class whites. At the same time, the state began passing its first Jim Crow laws, primarily pertaining to the separation of the races in public transportation. Over the next two decades, white legislators pieced together a system of segregation. In the early 1910s, municipalities became increasingly concerned with regulating the color line in residential areas. Richmond’s Vonderlehr law, designating city blocks as black or white, along with strictures for enforcing these distinctions on the realty market, reflected the trend across the state; it became a model law utilized by other large cities, most prominently Baltimore, in crafting similar statutes. The harshest Jim Crow law in the state, the Massenburg Bill, requiring racial separation in all public assemblages, was not passed until 1926.<sup>12</sup> The development of segregation in Virginia was a very long process as whites sought to understand the changing needs of

11. Brown, “Womanist Consciousness,” 626 (first quotation); Walker, *The Honey-Pod Tree*; and Raymond Gavins, *The Perils and Prospects of Southern Black Leadership: Gordon Blaine Hancock, 1884–1970* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1977).

12. Hale, *Making Whiteness*, 44–48; Dabney, *Virginia*, 434–41; Buni, *The Negro in Virginia Politics, 1902–1965*, 20–33; Morton, “The Negro in Virginia Politics, 1865–1902”; Ann Field Alexander, *Race Man: The Rise and Fall of the ‘Fighting Editor’ John Mitchell Jr.* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), 171–77; “To Test the Law,” *Richmond Planet*, June 1, 1912; John Mitchell, “That Segregation Ordinance,” *Richmond Planet*, June 1, 1912; and Oeconomicus, “Side Effects of Segregation,” *Richmond Planet*, Mar. 3, 1917. These are just a sampling of the newspaper coverage. For a detailed discussion of the passage of the Massenburg Bill as well as the Racial Integrity Act of 1924, see J. Douglas Smith, “The Campaign for Racial Purity and the Erosion of Paternalism in Virginia, 1922–1930: Nominally White, Biologically Mixed, and Legally Negro,” *Journal of Southern History* 68 (Feb. 2002): 65–106; and Richard B. Sherman, “The Last Stand’:

a state in the midst of dramatic urbanization and modernization while also justifying the necessity for a codified system of discrimination in light of their continuing concern with the state's paternalistic self-image.

Women, white and African American, played central roles in the segregation of Virginia. The few but influential white women who became interested in addressing the problems of the African American communities did so not out of any desire to overthrow the social order or challenge white supremacy, but out of a desire to strengthen Jim Crow. Rather than seeking a dramatic overthrow of the social system, white activists wanted to maintain a dialogue between the races in order to recapture what they "remembered" as a history of peaceful race relations in Virginia. White women such as Mary Munford and Elizabeth Cocke, full of paternalistic fervor, went into African American communities looking for reforms needing their support. African American women pushed as well, identifying their own concerns before turning to Munford and her allies for financial and political assistance.<sup>13</sup> The negotiations between these white and African American women in debates over access to state resources also provided a forum in which to discuss the daily realities of racial separation and helped shape the culture of segregation. The black and white worlds were never as clearly divided as the law books suggested.

The clearinghouse for much of this work in Virginia was the Board of Charities and Corrections (forerunner to the Virginia Department of Public Welfare) created by the General Assembly in March 1908. The board, an outgrowth of the state's involvement in the National Conference of Charities and Corrections, sought to update, regulate, and reform the state's health-care and correctional facilities, as well as charitable organizations such as orphanages and maternity homes. The organizers, reminiscent of an era when Virginia had been "one of the leaders in social thought at the time of the formation and development of the Union," argued that new approaches were needed within the state to solve the modern problems of the twentieth century. Charged by the General Assembly with "the general supervision of charitable and correctional activities, state and local," as well as with developing an investigative

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The Fight for Racial Integrity in Virginia in the 1920s," *Journal of Southern History* 54 (Feb. 1988): 69–92.

13. See Munford Papers; Mary Beard, *Woman's Work in Municipalities* (New York: D. Appleton, 1915), 170–98, 210–15; Ovington, *Portraits in Color*, 127–34, 181–93; Lauranett Lee, "More than an Image: Black Women Reformers in Richmond, Virginia, 1910–1928" (master's thesis, Virginia Union University, 1993); and Carla P. Oliver, "Maggie Lena Walker: A Leader of Her Race and Women in the Segregated Community of Richmond, Virginia, 1864–1934" (master's thesis, Virginia Commonwealth University, 1997).

study and educational campaign of statewide physical and mental health concerns, the board defined and molded one of the state's first sustained ventures into public welfare. Its major duties were visiting and inspecting various charitable and public facilities across the state, investigating tales of misconduct and serving as advocate to the General Assembly for increased funding. These responsibilities forced the board to evaluate how segregation fit into its Progressive designs. The board provided a forum not only for discussion but for oversight, to ensure that African American (and white) charitable institutions and associations were fulfilling their stated purposes. Although the members of the board were always white, a variety of African American leaders worked closely with the organization. T. C. Walker served for years as a committee member. Emma Bailey worked closely with the longtime secretary, Joseph Mastin, as a caseworker. The board meetings were open to all races, and African Americans frequently attended.<sup>14</sup>

The Board of Charities and Corrections had an "open door" policy in terms of sex as well as race. Women often participated in meetings, and though no African American woman ever became an "official" board member, several white women held that distinction. Although this interracial cooperation work occurred in the public and "male" sphere, nearly half of the individuals involved were women. This liberal inclusion of females stemmed from the desire among white reformers to segregate by sex as well as race in the belief that rehabilitation could only be achieved through categorization and separation. A "source of evil in our prisons," the board pleaded to the governor:

...is want of proper segregation. Public sentiment in Virginia is a unit in demanding the separation of the races; yet we force prisoners of one race, many of whom have been convicted of minor offenses and some of whom are held simply because they are unable to pay their fines, to associate with all sorts of criminals of the other race, to work together in the same group and even to sleep in the same [cells].

Individuals could not be reformed until separated into proper categories, the deaf and blind from the insane, the insane from the criminal, blacks from

14. James, *Virginia's Social Awakening*, 9 (first and second quotations), 2; Frequent discussions of African American institutions and concerns are found in the Board of Charities and Corrections minutes. For specific examples see July 26, 1909, Aug. 6, 1909, July 18, 1910, Nov. 23, 1910, Nov. 5, 1912, Nov. 16, 1915, Jan. 9, 1917, and May 6, 1923, entries, Board of Charities and Corrections minutes, Board Papers; Walker, *The Honey Pod Tree*, 125–38, 161; James, *Virginia's Social Awakening*, 57–63; and Lee, "More than an Image," 44.

whites, men from women. Accordingly, women tended to manage charities that catered either exclusively to women, such as maternity houses and female reformatories, or could be classified under maternal responsibilities, primarily orphanages and other child-centered initiatives. A number of white and black women founded and managed institutions of these types. In the 1910s the board began to appoint female parole officers, white and African American, assigned exclusively to work with female parolees of their own race.<sup>15</sup> Segregationists' professions of "separate but equal" necessitated Virginia women's inclusion in cross-racial reform efforts.

The career of Ora B. Stokes, a minister's wife from Richmond, offers one example of how African American women in Virginia took advantage of the activism opportunities ironically created by segregation in order to combat increasing racial discrimination. Around 1911, Stokes, along with several other African American community activists, founded the Richmond Neighborhood Association to address the problems of underprivileged African American girls. The organization created a sewing department to train young women in domestic employment skills and also opened a nursery for working mothers. Its motto "Not Alms, but a Friend" encouraged destitute women to help themselves in order to build not only financial security but also self-esteem. Wanting to expand training opportunities for black women, Stokes turned to a white acquaintance, Orie Latham Hatcher, then head of the Virginia Bureau of Vocations for Women. Stokes convinced Hatcher to redirect that organization's focus to include the needs of blacks as well as whites. The result of this cooperative endeavor was the Home for Working Girls, a segregated organization for black girls. Stokes served as president. She became well known throughout the state for her ability to communicate with and for the underprivileged and often neglected members of society, as well as for her rapport with white activists. In 1917 Governor H. C. Stuart chose Stokes to represent Virginia at the National Conference of Charities and Corrections meeting in Indianapolis. When the state Board of Charities and Corrections, in line with its segregationist views, convinced the General

15. Lee, "More than an Image," 44; May 14, 1919, report to Westmoreland Davis, Board of Charities and Corrections minutes, Board Papers (quotation); two of these women included Mrs. J. P. McConnell (also later a member of the Virginia Commission on Interracial Cooperation) and Mrs. Eudora R. Richardson; frequent lists are found in the Board of Charities and Correction minutes listing individuals who head charities, orphanages, and similar organizations across the state. In nearly every incidence, women are in charge of "female" or "child" designated institutions. See Board Papers, Nov. 11, 1919 and Nov. 16, 1921 entries, Board of Charities and Corrections minutes, Board Papers.

Assembly to hire black probation officers (both male and female), the board recommended Stokes in acknowledgment of her years of service. In 1918 she became one of Richmond's first African American probation officers, along with W. H. Tharpe.<sup>16</sup> The parolees under her guidance were all black females. By choosing to work with white segregationists for the expressed purpose of helping black women, Stokes found new opportunities and venues to carry out her own social agenda. These contacts offered her official sanction as well as occasional funding, which she utilized to carry out her own "uplift" programs within the African American community.

In addition to Stokes, Mary Munford (1865–1938) and Janie Porter Barrett (1865–1948) established themselves as two of the most prominent female reformers in Jim Crow Virginia. During the first half of the twentieth century, the two women, both separately and together, participated in countless social welfare initiatives. Virginians across the state, male and female, white and African American, viewed Munford and Barrett with respect. Both women were considered members of the elite of their race. Mary Cooke Branch Munford, white, boasted a lineage connected with the most aristocratic of Virginia's old families. Janie Porter Barrett, African American, also grew up in a wealthy white home (in Georgia) but as the daughter of the family's housekeeper. Munford was a devotee to the Lost Cause and a fervent believer in the superior gentility of the Old Dominion. She carefully modeled herself on her father's image as a benevolent paternalist. Barrett also valued herself among the state's elites, relishing the fact that she used fine silver rather than tin forks like most of her neighbors. Yet unlike Munford, Barrett lived under the veil of discrimination and an increasingly restrictive culture of segregation. Although neither was representative of the average Virginian woman, each was a representative of her race. Black women elected Barrett the first president of the Virginia Federation of Colored Women's Clubs. Munford held offices in numerous organizations, including the Richmond Educational Association, National Consumer League, and later the League of Women Voters. Both women brought credibility to any project they took up. Interracial efforts, particularly the founding of the Virginia Industrial School for Colored Girls, brought the two women together on a frequent basis.<sup>17</sup> They

16. Lee, "More than an Image," 41–47; Board of Charities and Corrections minutes, Board Papers.

17. Walter Russell Bowie, *Sunrise in the South: The Life of Mary-Cooke Branch Munford* (Richmond, VA: William Byrd Press, 1942), 1–25, 156–57; Ovington, *Portraits in Color*, 15, 181–93; Winona R. Hall, "Janie Porter Barrett, Her Life and Contributions to Social Welfare in Virginia" (master's thesis, Howard University, 1954), 9; and Munford Papers.

entered the work out of vastly different motivations: one inspired by the spirit of white paternalism and the other by a desire to uplift her race. Yet both believed interracial cooperation was the best way to achieve their goals.

Mary Cooke Branch Munford was already well known across the state as a prominent supporter of woman suffrage, increased educational opportunities for women, and various other social causes before becoming involved in cross-racial reforms in the 1910s. Like many of her fellow white activists, including Lucy Randolph Mason and Elizabeth Cocke, Munford's Virginia roots ran deep. She grew up in Richmond and not only belonged to one of the most prominent families in the state, but was related to numerous other First Families of Virginia. Although Munford's family never experienced poverty, she became interested at a young age in social welfare issues. This passion intensified after her 1893 marriage to Beverley Munford. In the 1890s, she organized and headed the Saturday Afternoon Club, a weekly study and social club of elite white Richmond women. Her involvement declined over time, when she could not convince the group to study "unfeminine" issues such as child labor and municipal sewage systems rather than Homer and Goethe. She also became involved with the Richmond Education Association, which promoted public education (a hotly debated issue in Virginia at the time), including a focus on African American educational opportunities. Connected with a national organization, the group held or attended national conferences every year that usually included a tour of some of the South's African American educational institutions. Although membership in the Richmond Education Association was restricted to whites, the organization had both male and female members, and Mary Munford (as well as Lila Meade Valentine) served as president for a number of years. Munford also joined and frequently held offices in many other organizations, including the National Consumer's League, the Equal Suffrage League of Virginia, the National Municipal League, and the YWCA. She also headed a fervent, though ultimately unsuccessful, campaign to found a coordinate college for (white) women at the University of Virginia.<sup>18</sup> By the second decade of the twentieth century,

18. Bowie, *Sunrise in the South*, 1–39, 46–51, 53–74, 103–43; Munford Papers. Both Mason and Cocke were old Virginia family names. For more about Mason see Mason, *To Win These Rights*; Saturday Afternoon Club, Richmond, Virginia, Records, 1894–1907, Virginia Historical Society (hereinafter SAC Papers); Robert Ogden to Ben Valentine, Feb. 25, 1904, Lila Meade Valentine Papers, Virginia Historical Society; Robert Ogden to Ben Valentine, no date, Valentine Papers; Marie Tyler-McGraw, *At the Falls: Richmond, Virginia, and Its People* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 233; Richmond Education Association Papers, Virginia Historical Society; for more information on Munford's involvement in the National Consumer's League, see Florence Kelley



Munford had established herself as a dedicated advocate of education, health, labor reforms, and woman suffrage.

Beginning around 1910, Munford focused increasingly on the plight of the African American community out of a sense of responsibility to her family's and state's history. According to her biographer, Walter Russell Bowie (her nephew and a social activist himself), Mary Munford took great pride in her family's heritage and the aristocracy it implied. She believed this status gave her the right and duty to speak on behalf of African Americans. The Richmond black newspaper, the *St. Luke's Herald*, run by Maggie Lena Walker, praised Munford by highlighting her lineage: "She [Mary Munford] belongs to that distinctive group that the colored people in the South call 'real' white people or 'bloods,' and sometimes, the entire descriptive phrase 'the blue bloods of Virginia.' We say this not with a bragging boast, but by way of explanation, that there are only a precious few white people in the South who gain such an estimate from the colored people." Munford became an advocate of African American concerns from an ingrained sense of noblesse oblige, believing, like her slaveholding ancestors, that it was her responsibility as a white aristocrat to care for what she regarded as the childlike black race. Rather than rejecting white supremacist ideologies like the Lost Cause, she drew inspiration from Confederate commemoration, often citing the love and loyalty of her family's ex-slaves as the reason for her activism in African American uplift causes.<sup>19</sup>

The unusual circumstances of her father's death also shaped Munford's commitment to racial paternalism. After the Civil War, Thomas Branch, a Confederate veteran, joined the Conservatives, a group of white politicians who hoped to regain their former power within the state and rebuild postwar Virginia by winning the votes of newly enfranchised blacks, believing naively that freedmen would turn to their former masters for guidance. As part of their campaign, on July 2, 1869, the Conservatives held a picnic designed especially to attract black voters on Vauxhall Island in the James River in support of their gubernatorial candidate Gilbert C. Walker. Two hundred and fifty white and African American men gathered under a banner of "United we stand; divided we fall." The pedestrian bridge out to the island collapsed under the weight of the crowd, and several individuals died; Munford's father

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to Mary Johnston, no date, Mary Johnston Papers, University of Virginia. Munford also helped to found one of the first YWCA clubs for working (white) women in Richmond.

19. *St. Luke's Herald* quoted in Bowie's *Sunrise in the South*, 171–72 (quotation); this is a common theme in writings by the whites involved in these interracial efforts. See Hammond, *In Black and White*.

was one of the victims. According to Bowie, Branch “was flung into the river, with a beam from the bridge pinning him down upon its rocks. Many men tried to save him, among them a Negro who himself was badly hurt, but they could not get him free in time.” Throughout her life, Munford frequently referred to this act of attempted heroism on the part of the black man mentioned as the impetus for her activism. In the words of Douglas Southall Freeman, white editor of the *Richmond News Leader* and member of the Board of Charities and Corrections, “It was because of the circumstances of his [Thomas Branch’s] death that her work for justice to the Negroes had a vigor and a positive persistence that could not be balked . . . one of her ideals . . . was to follow the same kindly road of amity and helpfulness to the Negroes.”<sup>20</sup> The dramatic story of her father’s demise in literal “sacrifice” to the cause of African American uplift led Munford to become one of Virginia’s most vocal white advocates of interracial cooperation.

Through her work with the Richmond Education Association, Munford had expressed her concern about the problems and limitations of African American educational opportunities, and in the 1910s, she broadened her approach to include a full-scale critique of the difficulties of Virginia’s African American populace, particularly those living in urban areas such as Richmond. She never acknowledged that segregation was responsible, but Munford recognized the growing problems in communities like Jackson Ward, the primarily African American district in Richmond, which never received the same sanitation, modernization, and maintenance as white sections. She deplored the inadequate, overcrowded housing. In the words of fellow reformer Elizabeth Cocke, “[T]he most extensive of these conditions exist among the negroes. These appear to be the most squalid and least progressive, but this I believe to be largely due to the demoralizing effects of bad housing and surroundings which do not tend to any uplift.” Munford frequently attended city council meetings to petition for improved services for black residential and business districts. In February 1912, Munford and Cocke encouraged the council to organize an “inspection tour” of Jackson Ward, in order for members to see for themselves the overcrowded and unsanitary conditions. Abandoning statistical lectures that had failed to persuade, Munford argued that action was desperately needed and that the “work

20. Morton, “The Negro in Virginia Politics, 1865–1902,” 75 (first quotation); Bowie, *Sunrise in the South*, 13 (second quotation), xiii (third quotation), 11–15. For more information on the rise of the Conservatives and post–Civil War politics in Virginia, see Jane Dailey, *Before Jim Crow: The Politics of Race in Post-Emancipation Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

would shine forth as a beacon light for movements of a similar character.” Although several African American residents also spoke out on the need for such an inspection, Munford’s presence led the council to agree to the visit. She continued lobbying efforts at city hall as well as help to found organizations such as the Community House for Negro People that, in part, trained black social workers.<sup>21</sup> Munford hoped that her statements and her position among the social elite would remind whites across the state of their neglected paternalistic duty.

Despite a sincere desire to help, Munford had little true understanding of the needs of black Virginians. She dealt with immediate issues such as poor street maintenance without recognizing that residential segregation laws were the real cause of the problem. Always acting from a white supremacist and segregationist standpoint, she and other white women frequently misunderstood African American concerns. Interracial interaction, however, helped to clarify some of these misconceptions. In a speech before a meeting of the National Municipal League held in Richmond in 1912, Elizabeth Cocke revealed that she understood that it was “a fallacy that the poor do not want good housing.” She had learned this fact after hearing a black woman proclaim a year before during a child welfare conference, “We would use the bath tub as frequently and enjoy it as much as our white brother and sister, if we could afford to rent houses which have the bath tub in them. We do not prefer dilapidation and discomfort, nor being forced to live in districts where there is only depravity and low surroundings.”<sup>22</sup>

21. Beard, *Woman’s Work*, 211 (first quotation); *Richmond Planet*, Feb. 3, 1912 (second quotation). See also Munford Papers, particularly correspondence with or for the YWCA, the Richmond Urban League, Commission on Interracial Cooperation, Woman’s Missionary Council, Community House for Colored People, Chamber of Commerce, Virginia War History Commission, and Richmond Council of Churches, among others. For more Jackson Ward and the conditions facing that district, see Lee, “More than an Image,” 2–11; Tyler-McGraw, *At the Falls*, 227; and Alexander, *Race Man*, 171–77.

22. Beard, *Woman’s Work*, 211 (first and second quotations). Another prominent example of a white woman who acted from similar motivations is Jessie Daniel Ames. See Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and Women’s Campaign against Lynching*, rev. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); most white female reformers during the early twentieth century fit this pattern. This position was expounded upon in the early days of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation with the publication of the pamphlet “Southern Women and Race Cooperation.” See “Southern Women and Race Cooperation: A Story of the Memphis Conference October Sixth and Seventh Nineteen Hundred and Twenty,” Munford Papers; one of the few exceptions is Virginian Lucy Randolph Mason, whose interracial work led her to question the justice of segregation. See Mason, *To Win These Rights*; and John Salmond, *Miss Lucy of the CIO: The Life and Times of Lucy Randolph Mason* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988).

Although naive and condescending, white women such as Cocke and Munford sincerely sought to bring African Americans the same Progressive reforms they desired for whites, arguing that it was the only way to ensure the success of segregation and bring racial harmony to the state. Speaking before a group of black women at the Richmond Hospital in 1911, Mary Johnston, the prominent white author and social activist, encouraged the women to become involved in municipal, child care, and health reforms and to “think about the good of your people, of your State, *our* State . . . every woman with every other woman, every small group or societies with other groups or societies, cooperation means working together, organization means drawing things [needing] help by themselves into a whole that is anything but helpless. It means united we stand: divided we fall.” She identified a common need that united women across racial lines. Although she believed whites and blacks would never be equal, she realized that they needed to work together in order to create the Progressive society they desired. Ever-mindful of cultivating these bonds of cooperation, Mary Burrell, the African American organizer of the event, wrote soon after to “personally thank” Johnston “for the great service rendered to the women of the Richmond Hospital, particularly and the race in general for your inspiring talk” and praised Johnston for her “kindly interest in my people.”<sup>23</sup> Although the majority of white women in Virginia remained indifferent to any requests for assistance from the African American populace, Johnston, Munford, Cocke, and others were idealists who believed separate could be equal.

These white and black women held vastly different opinions on the state of race relations and the justice of segregation, but they found themselves with similar agendas when facing such concrete concerns as improving hospitals and promoting a cleaner city to cut the skyrocketing death rate (especially among African Americans). In particular, they collaborated on issues concerning children and childcare reforms. White women did not routinely enter black neighborhoods and attempt to dictate “white” standards, unaware of what black women realistically needed to improve the health of their

23. “Talk Coloure Women,” June 9, 1911, Mary Johnston Speeches, Johnston Papers, emphasis added (first quotation); Mary E. Burrell to Mary Johnston, June 14, 1911, Johnston Papers (second quotation); Mary Johnston, in her writings and correspondence, expressed similar political and social views, at least concerning African Americans, to those of Mary Munford and Elizabeth Cocke. However, apart from this speech, she did little public campaigning on racial uplift issues; see Brooks, “Proper Voices, Radical Words,” and Clayton McClure Brooks, “Dreams of a Brotherhood: Mary Johnston, the Process of Racial Liberalization, and the Roots of Southern White Women’s Interracial Activism,” Jan. 2002, unpublished.

children. While this practice did occur in Virginia, cross-racial activism more often led to demonstrations of African American agency, not only within the black sphere but on the front line of racial interaction. Recently, various historians, Tera Hunter and Glenda Gilmore among them, not only have documented the experiences and achievements of African American women, but also highlighted the “agency” or control they exerted over their own lives even under the oppressive restrictions of segregation.<sup>24</sup> This work has focused primarily on actions within black neighborhoods. A reconsideration of interracial cooperation, however, reveals dramatic evidence of African Americans’ agency outside the more comfortable enclave of the black community. Often black women spearheaded reforms based on their own assessments of African Americans’ needs and then sought the help of whites to fulfill their plans. For their part, white women joined such causes as long as they fit within their own understanding of a properly segregated society. In practical terms, the groups’ contrasting motivations were of little relevance if the projects’ goals fit their shared reformist vision.

One of the most prominent interracial efforts of Virginia women in the early twentieth century was the Virginia Industrial School for Colored Girls. Although Janie Porter Barrett initiated the fundraising campaign and eventually became superintendent of the institution, the project would not have succeeded without interracial cooperation. Barrett’s reasons for establishing the school were far different from those of the whites involved, including Mary Munford. Barrett sought to save young African American girls from a life of crime and poverty. Whites supported the venture not only to get delinquent black girls off the streets or out of overcrowded jails, but also because the institution proposed to train its inmates for domestic service, thus, in the eyes of whites, turning a social blight into a solution to the ever-present servant problem. Janie Barrett successfully opened and ran the school to the satisfaction of white and black activists by skillfully lobbying for white support while assuring black Virginians that the project would live up to their own uplift goals.<sup>25</sup>

24. See Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*; Tera W. Hunter, *To Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); and Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894–1994* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999).

25. Hall, *Janie Porter Barrett*, 15–20; and Ovington, *Portraits in Color*, 181–93. For more on the often troubled relationships between white women and the black domestic employees, see Susan Tucker, *Southern Women: Domestic Workers and their Employers in the Segregated South* (New York: Schocken Books, 1988).

Barrett was known throughout the state as an African American reformer and club leader long before she conceived the idea of the Virginia Industrial School for Colored Girls. Although she first developed an interest in the work as a student at Hampton Institute, she did not become actively involved in reform efforts until after her marriage to Harris Barrett in 1889. The Barretts were not wealthy, but they were financially comfortable and prominent members of the African American community in Hampton. Unlike many married African American women, Janie Barrett did not need to work outside the home. Instead, she dedicated her life to social welfare reforms. Around 1890, Barrett had founded a settlement house at her home in Hampton, Virginia, which was the first of its kind in the state. She built the Locust Street Settlement House in her own front yard as a center of community uplift. With the aid of volunteers Barrett provided childcare for working families, taught the virtues of domesticity and sanitation standards, and also held cultural and artistic programs. In addition to this pet project, she, in the words of white reformer Lily Hammond, “built a bridge between the races” by making friends with white women living in Hampton and starting an interracial “Clean-Up” campaign. She was also involved in a variety of women’s clubs, most prominently the Virginia Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs, which she helped to found and then served as president.<sup>26</sup> Her work with that organization took her across the state and allowed her to establish contacts with numerous white and black activists.

Around 1910, Barrett became deeply interested in the plight of abandoned or neglected children and determined that the state needed a reformatory school for delinquent black girls. Similar institutions already existed for white and black boys as well as white girls, yet state officials had little initiative or financial appropriations to begin such a project for black girls. Such facilities were popular nationwide among Progressive reformers, who sought to remove troubled children from jails and offer them the opportunity for education and rehabilitation. In 1912, Barrett presented her idea at the biennial meeting of the National Association of Colored Women held that year in Hampton. At her request, committees and clubs across Virginia began to raise money for the project. Knowing the importance of influential supporters, Barrett enlisted the fund-raising skills of Maggie Lena Walker, the prominent African American banker and club leader in Richmond. In addition, she

26. Lily Hardy Hammond, *In the Vanguard of a Race*. In *Race and the South: Two Studies, 1914–1922* (New York: Arno Press, 1972, orig. 1922), 87 (first quotation), 84–86; Hall, *Janie Porter Barrett*, 10–15, 183; and Ovington, *Portraits in Color*, 183–85.

appealed for advice and funds from the white philanthropic Russell Sage Fund in New York.<sup>27</sup> Only months after her proposal, Barrett received promising support from both African American groups across the state and her northern white contacts.

Barrett realized, however, that white Virginians' approval of her reformatory was critical to its success; thus, in November 1912, in the midst of her fundraising frenzy, she presented her plan to the Board of Charities and Corrections. Drawing upon Barrett's reputation as a dedicated social worker within the black community, particularly her work in Hampton, the board passed a resolution of support:

RESOLVED: That this Board wishes very heartily to commend the movement to establish a reform industrial school for colored girls. The present situation is one discreditable to the Commonwealth and unjust to our colored population, in that for want of an institution for the care of the delinquent colored girls, the Commonwealth is forced to commit these girls to jail, where they are subject to immoral influences and cannot hope for reform. We trust heartily that this condition will be changed and that an institution will be opened where these girls can be given a fair opportunity to reform and to lay the foundations for future usefulness.<sup>28</sup>

While the white board members did not offer any financial aid, they recognized the advantages of assisting Barrett and the Federation of Colored Women's Clubs of Virginia. Simply, their goals meshed. The proposed Virginia Industrial School for Colored Girls supported segregationist policies. Furthermore, the removal of these young women from jails would considerably reduce the board's caseload. The Board of Charities and Corrections' commendation of Barrett's plan validated the project in the eyes of many white activists.

Interracial cooperation became the key to the school's success. By 1913, Barrett's cause had received widespread support from white and black indi-

27. For a more in-depth discussion of this juvenile delinquent reform movement, see Elizabeth J. Clapp, *Mothers of All Children: Women Reformers and the Rise of Juvenile Courts in Progressive Era America* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998); Hall, *Janie Porter Barrett*, 15–20; James, *Virginia's Social Awakening*, 79–97; Dorothy Salem, *To Better Our World: Black Women in Organized Reform, 1890–1920* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing, 1990), 110; Oliver, "Maggie Lena Walker," 82; Lee, "More than an Image," 60–62; Ovington, *Portraits in Color*, 127–34; and Hammond, *In the Vanguard of a Race*, 115–18.

28. Nov. 5, 1912, Board of Charities and Corrections minutes, Board Papers.

viduals and associations across the state. She raised \$5,300 and soon bought a 140-acre farm in Peake's Turnout, Virginia, about eighteen miles outside of Richmond. To bring the project to fruition, she assembled a board of trustees comprising two leading white clubwomen in Richmond (one of whom was Mary Munford), a well-known white minister, a white businessman, as well as several leading members of the African American community, including Maggie Walker. With the support of the prominent board of trustees, the endorsement of the Board of Charities and Corrections, and, perhaps most important, the legislative lobbying by the two well-connected white women, the 1914 General Assembly granted an annual appropriation to the school of three thousand dollars. Munford and the other white woman promised two thousand more annually. With this widespread support from activists on both sides of the color line, the Virginia Industrial School for Colored Girls opened in January 1915, leading Barrett to declare that, "we cannot do the best social welfare work unless, as in this school, the two races undertake it together."<sup>29</sup>

Although whites played a major role in ensuring the opening and later longevity of the institution, Barrett remained firmly in control. She became superintendent of the school in 1916 to stem protests from neighboring whites who declared that they would only accept the institution if it was under her "respectable" guidance. Initially, Barrett had made a point of resisting the position publicly, stressing the great sacrifice involved. She recalled that when one of her white female associates first proposed the idea, she exclaimed, "I, go to Peake! I, give up my pretty home to live in a dormitory and eat from thick plates with a tin fork?" In fact, the 1915 death of her husband was probably the central factor in her decision to accept the position, for financial as well as altruistic reasons. Barrett, however, always insisted that her employment was solely an act of moral duty. She often reminded her white patrons of her sacrifice and worked to cultivate the image of herself as a "lady," a privilege typically reserved for white women. She demanded respect because of her decision to take on the responsibilities of the daily running of the school and reiterated that it was a decision made out of civic duty, not necessity. Many whites recognized her dedication and piety and

29. Salem, *To Better Our World*, 110–11; Hammond, *In the Vanguard of a Race*, 88–89, 108–18; James, *Virginia's Social Awakening*, 92; Munford Papers; and Ovington, *Portraits in Color*, 190. I have not found the name of the other white woman; my guess is that it was Elizabeth Cocke. Bowie discusses Munford's role in the founding of Barrett's reformatory in his biography; see Bowie, *Sunrise in the South*, 156–57.



trusted her ability to shape the school into a beneficial institution. Barrett relied on this influence to retain the support of white patrons and develop friendly relations with the school's neighbors. Unlike the white girls' reformatory at Bon Air that frequently found itself in lawsuits with surrounding residents, the Virginia Industrial School for Colored Girls was well liked by the black and white citizens of Peake's Turnout. When the state took over the organization a few years after its founding, no one questioned Barrett's management skills. She remained in charge of the daily running of the school and worked with, rather than for, the interracial board of trustees.<sup>30</sup> By behaving impeccably within the parameters for black women defined by white society, Barrett cultivated the support from influential whites to run her institution under her own terms.

Barrett declared herself a "lady" not simply to incur the favor of whites while quietly defying white assertions of superiority, but also as a product of class identification. She identified herself not only as an African American woman, but as a leader and an elite of her race. Very light-skinned, as a child Barrett had been treated not as the housekeeper's daughter, but as a pampered child among the family's white offspring. As Barrett grew older, her mother and the white mistress of the household fought over her future. The white woman wanted her housekeeper to give up all rights and custody of her daughter, in order for Barrett to be sent north to school, where she could pass as white. Barrett's mother refused, sending her to Hampton. Barrett frequently retold this tale of her childhood to cultivate and perpetuate her image of refinement and sacrifice as well as illustrate her appreciation of white paternalism. As an adult, she placed enormous value on material luxuries, particularly china, silver, and fine linens, which she regarded as emblems of her privileged status. Although concerned about the needs of her community, Barrett never let her neighbors forget her good fortune. When living in Hampton, she sent meals to different poor families every Sunday on her finest

30. Ovington, *Portraits in Color*, 186 (first quotation); Hammond, *In the Vanguard of a Race*, 89–93; Hall, *Janie Porter Barrett*, 20–24; James, *Virginia's Social Awakening*, 90–91; "The Trouble at Bon Air," *Richmond Planet*, Oct. 11, 1913; editorial, *Richmond Planet*, Sept. 13, 1913; "Beverley Banks at Bon Air. Rev. Morris Speaks," *Richmond Planet*, July 19, 1913. Barrett's strategy paralleled that of various other African American women activists, like, for example, Charlotte Hawkins Brown (1883–1961) of North Carolina. Both Brown and Barrett cultivated and perhaps created pasts for themselves (Barrett's youth in a wealthy white home and Brown's relationship with white educator Alice Freeman Palmer), to which they frequently referred as their motivations for service. For more information of Charlotte Hawkins Brown, see Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*, 178–95.

china, expecting the dishes and accompanying silver utensils to be returned promptly and in good order.<sup>31</sup>

Although the color of her skin enabled Barrett to identify with the underprivileged African American masses far more than white reformers could ever conceive, Barrett's impetus to activism stemmed partly from a paternalistic detachment in which benevolence reinforced her sense of social superiority. In quiet defiance of whites' core racial beliefs, Barrett believed she had as much in common with the white women on her board of trustees as with the troubled young women sent to her school. She felt her elite status morally obligated her to cooperate with members of that "better class" of whites in order to help less fortunate members of her race. Thus, she concluded that the most important lessons her charges needed to learn were how to behave as proper ladies, according to the standards of white society. By using a detailed honor system that offered a graduated system of rewards and privileges for good behavior, Barrett taught her charges, some of whom had committed egregious crimes, the values of virtuous womanhood that she attempted to maintain in her own life.<sup>32</sup> Barrett dedicated herself to helping these troubled young African American women out of a sense of class obligation apart from her concern with racial solidarity.

Barrett, along with the interracial board of trustees, wanted to prepare the students of the reformatory to assume a respectable "place" in segregated society upon their release. Thus, apart from providing a general education of reading, writing, and arithmetic, the institution focused on teaching the girls proper homemaking skills. For Munford and her white colleagues, this curriculum perfectly illustrated how their benevolent support of African American concerns bolstered their own ideals of a racially ordered society. They were not only saving neglected black girls, but also solving their own chronic

31. Ovington, *Portraits in Color*, 181–82, 192–93; Hall, *Janie Porter Barrett*, 6–7, 13; and Hammond, *In the Vanguard of a Race*, 78–82, 84–86. This story of her childhood is retold in many histories. Lily Hammond's work is one of the most extensive. Not coincidentally, this account is the only one written by a southern white woman, a contemporary of Barrett. Hammond emphasized the paternalistic treatment Barrett received. Barrett, in fact, probably stressed these details to Hammond because she knew the story fit into Hammond's white supremacist paternalistic mind-set. She herself cultivated this tale of her childhood in order to perpetuate her image of refinement and sacrifice.

32. This feeling of obligation was common among early-twentieth-century African American female professional women. See Stephanie J. Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do: Black Professional Women Workers during the Jim Crow Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Ovington, *Portraits in Color*, 186–91.

servant problem. Barrett cooperated and, in fact, encouraged this agenda because she believed it to be the most practical course of action to teach her charges to cope with the difficulties of living in a Jim Crow society that offered African American women few employment options apart from domestic service. Barrett foresaw some students using their training to manage, like she had, their own “proper” homes, but she acknowledged that most of them would be servants in white households. Although she was the daughter of a woman who spent her life keeping house for a white family, Barrett believed she had risen above that existence through money, marriage, and community service to establish herself as one of the “better class” and never entertained the idea of herself or her daughters working as domestic servants. However, she recognized the need for dignity and proper training for those less fortunate than herself. In alignment with Booker T. Washington’s philosophy, she stressed the importance of hard work, polite behavior, and racial pride.<sup>33</sup> Barrett never approved of the limitations of Jim Crow, but she believed practicality demanded that individuals, at least outwardly, accept their place in society (in terms of both class and race) and find realistic means of survival.

Given her background, Barrett was not blind to the frequent incidences of poor treatment of domestic servants, and accordingly, she attempted to educate white women in their responsibilities to their employees. She stood up for the rights of her students despite the potential for white reprisal. “Such a terrible creature as I am thought to be,” she once exclaimed, “You see, I must know where my children are going [once paroled], since until they are twenty-one they are under my care.” She demanded references from white employers as well as assurances that each of her “girls” would be provided a private bedroom inside the protection of the home with a bed properly equipped with linens and bedding, facilities for bathing, fixed hours, and the opportunity and encouragement to attend church. Moreover, Barrett explained, “I insist also that she have a wage. My girls are not to be paid in board and old clothes only.” She wanted them to have the opportunity to save their earnings and build a better life for themselves. “At first the women were angry at

33. Ovington, *Portraits in Color*, 186–90; Hall, *Janie Porter Barrett*, 21–23. Most African American women in the segregated South had few employment options. For examples across the region, see Tucker, *Southern Women*; Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*; and William Henry Chafe, et al., eds., *Remembering Jim Crow: African Americans Tell about Life in the Segregated South* (New York: New Press, 2001). See also Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery*, ed. William L. Andrew (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

this," Barrett reflected, "they couldn't understand the demands I made upon them."<sup>34</sup> However, she convinced the white women of the efficacy of her guidelines, perhaps because these requirements also fit nicely with their elitist concerns of guarding and regulating, through proximity and influence, the morality of social inferiors.

Barrett believed that the key to surviving within the culture of segregation, regardless of one's occupation or wealth, was the ability to understand and work with whites. Although courageous in making demands, she always remained concerned with white public perceptions and proffered at least lip service to the prescribed racialized and gendered role assigned to her by societal conventions. Despite Barrett's tenacity and Maggie Lena Walker's outstanding fund-raising skills, the Virginia Industrial School for Colored Girls would never have achieved the success it did without the political and social connections of Mary Munford and the other whites on the board of trustees. They helped Barrett access a world of power denied her by segregation, and she let them have all the credit for her success: "I could never have succeeded as I have in my demands, except that my Board has stood loyally back of me. Such wonderful white women!" Such behavior enabled her to pursue successfully her own agenda, and she hoped to teach this lesson to her students. She attributed many of her charges' problems to their families' failure to teach them how to interact properly with whites. For example, Barrett blamed the infamous Virginia Christian case, in which a young black girl was executed for killing a white woman, on the girl's mother, who had instilled in her daughter the maxim "Don't ever let a white woman touch you!" Barrett argued that black women undoubtedly had the right to protect and defend themselves but sought to show her charges that racial cooperation was a safer path to follow in an increasingly inequitable and often violent world. She reminded the students of the debt they owed the patrons of the institution. One member of Barrett's staff later reflected, "We constantly told them of the good women (Negro and White) who were laboring for them and striving to have them help make the world better by having lived in it."<sup>35</sup> Barrett taught them the advantages of viewing white women as potential allies rather than certain adversaries.

34. Ovington, *Portraits in Color*, 190.

35. Ovington, *Portraits in Color*, 190–91 (all quotations); and Hall, *Janie Porter Barrett*, 19. The Virginia Christian case was a major story throughout 1912 in the *Richmond Planet*. For examples, see "Virginia Christian's Appeal for Clemency," *Richmond Planet*, July 13, 1912; "Another Just Decision," Oct. 5, 1912, *Richmond Planet*.

Nevertheless, the relationships between white and African American women should not be dismissed as simply mutual manipulation. Although race remained a dividing factor, Barrett appreciated and respected Mary Munford, who remained on the school's board of trustees for many years. When Munford left the board in the mid-1920s for health reasons, Barrett wrote: "I am heartbroken. I just cannot get over it, not having you on our Board, you who have meant so much to us through the years. . . . It is a real comfort to know that you will keep up your interest in our cause. Mrs. Munford, you have been a wonderful help to us through the years, for which I am very, very grateful." Mary Ovington, a northern white woman prominent in the NAACP, stressed the importance of this interracial dynamic when reporting on the success of Barrett's reformatory. Ovington emphasized that although black women outnumbered white women on the institution's board of directors, the white women were "not figureheads but hard, devoted workers." Although she privately disapproved of segregation and southern white women's expressions of white supremacy, Ovington praised their work, arguing that "too much credit cannot be given to the white women who first entered upon the work at the plea of the colored women, and who now hold their positions as appointees of the governor."<sup>36</sup> Munford granted not simply her name to Barrett's project, but her time and energy as well. Apart from the Virginia Industrial School for Colored Girls, Munford and Barrett served in numerous organizations together in the 1920s, including the Richmond Community House for Colored People, the Richmond Urban League, and the Commission on Interracial Cooperation. In spite of their social differences, the two worked closely together for over a decade, and in fighting for similar social reforms they developed a degree of mutual respect.

As a result of her childhood and rather privileged life, Barrett never accepted white claims of African American inferiority. Although she clearly understood and experienced the inequities of racial discrimination, Barrett had full confidence in her own social prominence and accomplishments. She and her friend Maggie Lena Walker believed their positions within the "better class" of African Americans led to shared interests with "better class" white women, even with Mary Cooke Branch Munford, whose very name bespoke Virginia's white aristocracy. Barrett and Walker considered Munford their partner, not their benefactor. As Walker observed, "The white women

36. Bowie, *Sunrise in the South*, 156–57 (first quotation); Ovington, *Portraits in Color*, 186 (second and third quotations). For more information about Mary Ovington and her friendship with W. E. B. Du Bois see David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868–1919* (New York: Henry Holt, 1993).

don't work for us,—they work with us.”<sup>37</sup> Barrett and women like her had an unshakable sense of their own respectability as southern women that defied white society's attempts to exclude them from the role of “ladies.”

The experiences of Munford and Barrett suggest that though the term *inter-racial cooperation* has been invoked frequently in the histories of the twentieth century, it has been defined too narrowly. Drawing from the experiences of the civil rights movement, when some whites finally joined the struggle to end Jim Crow, historians have interpreted these earlier initiatives only in terms of liberal attempts to overthrow the South's culture of segregation. While this definition may be correct for the 1960s, in the early 1900s the white population generally accepted interracial work as necessary to racial harmony. Rather than challenging racial discrimination, “efforts to better race relations” in these early years attempted, in the words of African American editor John Mitchell, to “make more palatable the various species of injustice dealt out to the Negro in America, and particularly in the South, by the dominant white race.”<sup>38</sup> These often overlooked interactions offer a fresh perspective on daily life within the culture of segregation, where negotiation was necessary to maintain social peace and order. Cross-racial initiatives did not generally result in grand gestures or declarations of goodwill between races or function as opportunities for African Americans to relate the emotional distress of discrimination. Instead, the work focused on the mundane, practical aspects of dealing with public reform and expanding municipal services in a society that was supposedly dual, but always intricately connected. Instead of threatening the culture of segregation, interracial cooperation in pre-World War I era in Virginia functioned as a system of negotiation through which Jim Crow was created and legitimized.

Later in the 1920s, a revival of racial purity campaigns in Virginia encouraged by state Anglo-Saxon clubs under the direction of John Powell, well known both as a talented musician and a indefatigable racial reactionary, led

37. Hammond, *In the Vanguard of a Race*, 115–16. For an example of how a similar school was founded through white suffragists' support in exchange for black women's votes for reform candidates in Nashville see Anita Shafer Goodstein, “A Rare Alliance: African American and White Women in the Tennessee Elections of 1919 and 1920,” *Journal of Southern History* 64 (May 1998): 219–46.

38. “The Lucy Mason Testimonial,” *Richmond Planet*, July 23, 1932 (quotation). For more information on this later version of interracial cooperation see John Egerton, *Speak Now against the Day: The Generation before Civil Rights Movement in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Fred Hobson, *But Now I See: The White Southern Racial Conversion Narrative* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1999); and Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin, *The Making of a Southerner* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1946).

to a dramatic change in public opinion concerning interracial cooperation among whites in the state. Forgetting earlier acceptance of such initiatives, the white Virginian populace decided these “efforts to better race relations” epitomized by the new Commission on Interracial Cooperation were a threat to the region’s racial hierarchy. The white majority began to question the motivations of whites involved in the seemingly heretical organization. Rumors replete with sexual innuendos began to spread, including a persistent story that Munford kept a picture of Booker T. Washington in her bureau. Despite this change in white public opinion, most white activists continued to believe in the righteousness of trying to make segregation equal. Ironically, the worsening racial situation led to a growth in organized interracial efforts, particularly through the Commission on Interracial Cooperation.<sup>39</sup> In the late 1920s and 1930s, as economic, health, and education conditions worsened, some white liberals began to listen more closely to African American concerns; only then did “interracial cooperation” cease to be a central prop of segregation and become a forum to debate its morality and efficacy.

Jim Crow laws never created mutually exclusive black and white worlds.<sup>40</sup> Every day the races met on the streets, in businesses, in white homes, and at numerous other venues. Rather than creating insular cultural spheres, segregation provided a language for justifying and glossing over racial discrimination, as well as the legal strictures for enforcing white supremacy. Whites never gave up the control that segregation, in theory, demanded. Few white Virginians in the early years of the twentieth century believed blacks capable of surviving in a society equal to yet separate from their influence. Cross-racial activism evolved as one nonviolent method for whites to try to continue to direct African American lives; it encouraged racial discrimination while offering whites the moral satisfaction that these measures were necessary to ensure racial harmony. Despite white fantasies of an immutable color line, black and white southerners lived in a shared, not parallel, world.

Munford and her white counterparts asserted that although segregation was essential to restoring racial harmony, interracial cooperation was neces-

39. Winston Broadfoot, “Interview with Adele Clark, Feb. 28, 1964, Richmond, Virginia,” 39, Virginia Historical Society; the Anglo-Saxon Clubs were Virginia’s response to 100 percent Americanism campaigns and the regrowth of the KKK nationwide. Though the KKK drew some support, the Anglo-Saxon clubs within the state became more popular. See Smith, *Managing White Supremacy*; Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); John Powell Papers, University of Virginia; and Wilma Dykeman and James Stokely, *Seeds of Southern Change: The Life of Will Alexander* (1962; reprint, New York: W. W. Norton, 1976).

40. Hale, *Making Whiteness*, 121–97.

sary to address the real problems of twentieth-century life, particularly in light of widespread poverty among black Virginians. They were angered that so many of their white contemporaries had abandoned the black populace and forgotten their traditionally asserted role as protectors. Reformers' zeal for service came from a reinterpretation of white supremacy and revival of antebellum proslavery arguments that concluded true supremacy lay in serving others, their own personal dependence on black servants notwithstanding. "Above all," minister and reformer Walter Bowie once exclaimed, "the attitude of the white race must be Christian. Any race which tries to save its own soul, and at the same time tramples on the soul of a weaker people, shall lose it." White activists felt a moral duty to improve the lot of blacks according to their own (white) assessments. They found interracial cooperation to be the best way to oversee the lives of black Virginians, whom they deemed children in need of supervision. Imitating the British colonial tactic of "indirect rule," whites gave the "better class" of black leaders control over certain institutions, like the Virginia Industrial School for Colored Girls, in exchange for their adherence to the strictures of segregation.<sup>41</sup> Reconciling the modern "reform" of segregation with older ideals of paternalism, interracial cooperation offered white reformers the language and means to justify and dictate the development of segregation while maintaining a careful supervision over the supposedly separate black world.

Janie Porter Barrett, Maggie Lena Walker, and Ora B. Stokes, along with numerous other black leaders, realized the benefits of having white help in a state that denied African Americans their basic social, economic, and political rights. They used white segregationists' rhetoric of paternalism to demand actualization of the "promise" of separate but equal. Risking criticism from other African Americans that they were behaving like the "white man's Negro," and realizing that equality under segregation was an empty hope, they nevertheless acknowledged the practicality and benefits of appealing to socially minded whites who sought to make the dream real.<sup>42</sup> Cross-racial activism provided a forum in which African Americans could voice their concerns about issues such as poverty, disease, and education and suggest reforms. Often, if the initiatives fell within the segregated framework, the projects were

41. Walter Russell Bowie speech draft "Goodwill and Race Adjustment" written for Founder's Day at Hampton Institute 1926, Munford Papers (quotation). For one example of how "Indirect Rule" was implemented in Nigeria, in regards to mental asylums for native Nigerians, see Jonathan Sadowsky, *Imperial Bedlam: Institutions of Madness in Colonial Southwest Nigeria* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

42. Walker, *The Honey Pod Tree*, 216.



accomplished. By acting out their prescribed role of worthy black citizens in need of white assistance, these activists made tremendous gains in extending social reforms to black neighborhoods. African American reformers could not stop the segregation of Virginia or eradicate racial prejudice, but interracial cooperation did open needed doors of communication and negotiation.

The culture of segregation also, unexpectedly, expanded opportunities for female activism within the supposedly “males-only” public domain. Across the nation in the early twentieth century, “New Women” pushed the boundaries of gender roles to articulate social welfare concerns.<sup>43</sup> Since reforms were usually divided by sex as well as race female activists claimed the right and the responsibility to advocate for causes such as maternity homes, female reformatories, and women parole officers. Virginia women across racial lines often found that the best way to address these concerns was through interracial cooperation efforts. White and black women had the freedom to work together without any of the scandalous sexual undertones that similar encounters with black men would have suggested. Their interactions were easily accepted and encouraged by the white populace as replicating, at least publicly, the benevolent mistress/grateful servant paradigm praised by devotees of the Lost Cause. Although women were not the only leaders of interracial cooperation efforts, and the work never became a strictly feminine endeavor, these female activists made history by claiming their space as equal participants within reformist circles despite living in one of the most restrictive and discriminating societies found in twentieth-century America.

These lost stories of southern women working together across racial lines offer new perspectives on the meanings and legacies of interracial cooperation and on the making of a segregated society. Janie Porter Barrett, concerned with the plight of neglected African American girls, was the mastermind and dynamic force behind the founding of the Virginia Industrial School for Colored Girls, but the reformatory was a success and flourished largely because of her white supporters. White women, including Mary Munford,

43. There are many excellent studies of this woman's movement see Eleanor Flexner's *Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959); and Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987). Suzanne Lebsock has written about Virginia, in particular, considering the connections between white women's suffrage activism and involvement in interracial endeavors. See Suzanne Lebsock, “Woman Suffrage and White Supremacy: A Virginia Case Study,” in *Visible Women: New Essays on American Activism*, ed. Nancy A. Hewitt and Suzanne Lebsock (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 62–90.

cooperated with Barrett because the school fit into their vision of segregated racial spheres and, as a bonus, produced well-trained domestic servants. Regardless of these varying motivations, the institution was a substantial achievement that offered numerous young women shelter, health care, and education. In pre–World War I Virginia, many whites believed cooperation across the color line was the only way, in accordance with their continuing concern with paternalism, to make segregation work. African American activists, on the other hand, pragmatically viewed these efforts as opportunities to make concrete material gains. Although never succeeding in making segregation “equal,” these African American activists utilized these lines of communication with influential whites to extend some limited Progressive reforms into black communities and, perhaps more importantly, to maintain a delicate balance of outwardly amicable race relations that dramatically reduced incidences of violence within Virginia. Whites used interracial cooperation to extend and strengthen segregation, but the work also offered considerable benefits to African Americans in terms of reasonable assumptions of safety as well as advancements in the availability and quality of needed social welfare services.

Although Janie Porter Barrett and Mary Munford, along with their counterparts, were motivated by vastly different concerns, they joined together in cross-racial reform efforts because they believed the work could best help them achieve their individual goals. The negotiations that made these interracial cooperation initiatives function helped to shape what Jim Crow would mean in Virginia. Through interracial cooperation, the culture of segregation was molded and defined on a day-by-day and case-by-case basis. Rather than functioning simply as a set of static legal codes, segregation was an intricate, ever-evolving framework of negotiation and control. Female reformers, white and African American, used the limited space created by segregation to publicize the need for cooperation across gender as well as racial lines. Reevaluating the history of Jim Crow reveals untold histories—African American agency amid a seemingly white-dictated realm, female activism within the strictures of a segregated society, the perseverance of paternalism, and the difficulty and effort of maintaining the color line. The key to reevaluating the legacies and lived experiences of segregation lies in recognizing the centrality of interracial cooperation in its early legitimization and maintenance. Female activists, black and white from across the state, understood the importance of this work and thus became unlikely allies in efforts to reform and modernize Jim Crow Virginia.

## Solving the Girl Problem

Race, Womanhood, and Leisure in Atlanta during World War I

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*Sarah Mercer Judson*

In the War I era, female reformers became a significant presence in Atlanta politics by mobilizing around two seemingly disparate sociopolitical issues—concern over the growing heterosocial leisure culture and the call to arms for domestic war work. Examining African American and white clubwomen's political activities reveals the ways that Atlanta's urban culture of white supremacy created opportunities for African American and white women to advance their visions of community order and female citizenship in the war-time panic over women's sexuality. White and black clubwomen drew from popular discourses, the politics of respectability, and anxieties over women's relationship to modern, urban life to fashion female gender identities that stood apart from those projected by white male political leaders and businessmen in Atlanta. Both groups of women targeted commercialized leisure as a principal hazard of the city during wartime, a danger that appeared to threaten the growing numbers of women flocking to the city.<sup>1</sup>

Atlanta had a complex and highly developed female political culture that,

1. Among the many historians who explore the relationships between the politics of respectability, modern urban culture, and white racial rule are Georgina Hickey, *Hope and Danger in the New South City* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003); Tera Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom, Black Women's Lives and Labors in the South after the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy A Load, Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894–1940* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999).

throughout the early twentieth century, propelled both African American and white women into municipal politics. While their experiences and strategies differed because of the race politics of the city, members of both the black and white women's club movements asserted a forceful presence as they influenced city government by organizing political campaigns and creating neighborhood institutions.<sup>2</sup>

During the war years, clubwomen took advantage of their positions to spearhead local domestic defense work as well as guide city and federal wartime policies to benefit women. The fact that racial segregation shaped government policies, as well as divided black and white women, forced clubwomen to develop strategies that emphasized different themes. White clubwomen's wartime work invested in a politics of respectability that tied women's citizenship to public displays of their chastity. African American clubwomen focused more closely on utilizing public spaces to protect black Atlantans from sexual and racial assault. Although both groups of women took advantage of the needs of the wartime state to achieve their goals, white women were more successful at creating and working in the political spaces that they carved out in the interstices between municipal and federal politics. African American women lacked the political connections available to white women, and thus their activism was more neighborhood-based and rooted in local institutions.

Since the turn of the century, African American and white middle-class women had voiced concerns about the "new," modern lifestyle, in particular the experiences of young urban women. For example, African American women formed the Neighborhood Union in the early twentieth century "to provide wholesome and beneficial sports and games for the young," especially women. In Atlanta, migration, industrialization, and urbanization set the stage for what reformers and clubwomen feared heralded the crumbling of the Victorian sex/gender system. Now, against the backdrop of the war and supported by the expanding federal government, these women inserted themselves into the public arena as reform leaders.<sup>3</sup>

2. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*; Sarah Judson, "Building the New South City: African American and White Clubwomen in Atlanta, 1895–1930" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1997); Darlene Roth, "Matronage, Patterns in Women's Organizations, Atlanta, Georgia, 1890–1940" (Ph.D. diss., George Washington University, 1978); Jacqueline Rouse, *Lugenia Burns Hope, Black Southern Reformer* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989).

3. Charter of Neighborhood Union, 1911, Neighborhood Union Collection, Atlanta University, Atlanta, Georgia. See Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, 137. For other works that identify these concerns among women reformers in cities across the United States, see Hazel Carby, "Policing the Black Woman's Body in an Urban Context," *Critical Inquiry*

At issue was the nature of women's experience and participation in city life. Would women, newly freed from both patriarchal and maternal controls by work opportunities, take on the role of pleasure-seeking consumers seemingly devoted to instant gratification? Or would they behave as orderly and respectable community members, abiding by the social and cultural expectations of the middle-class, be it African American or white?<sup>4</sup> Both groups of clubwomen saw promise in this latter female identity, promise for survival and for political success. The other image, involving participation in urban spectacle and commercialized leisure, offered only danger.

Thus as women organized domestic support for the war, they incorporated into this work a sexual politics and a notion of female citizenship that challenged both the temptations of the modern city and traditional southern white male authority. By creating new public spaces in the city to provide alternatives to mixed-sex dance halls and bars, women reformers gained a certain level of authority in fashioning the sexual politics of the city, usually at the expense of working class women's autonomy. Like all aspects of southern life during this period, race politics shaped all women's reform efforts. While both African American and white women played on the needs articulated by the federal government as a means to temper local white male political rule, white women benefited more directly from the support of local and national wartime organizations.<sup>5</sup>

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(Summer 1992): 738–55; Sarah Deutsch, *Women and the City, Gender, Space, and Power in Boston, 1870–1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).

4. For a definition of class that takes into consideration the differentials in economic positions faced by whites and African Americans in the turn-of-the-century United States, see White, *Too Heavy a Load*, 70. For an examination of tensions surrounding the development of consumer society and gender roles within that society see Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough, eds., *The Sex of Things, Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 4–6; Elizabeth Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City, Urban Life, the Control of Disorder, and Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

5. For discussions on the early-twentieth-century sexual revolution and the “crumbling” of the Victorian sex/gender system, see, among others, Hazel Carby, “‘It Jus’ Be’s Dat Way Sometime’: The Sexual Politics of Women’s Blues,” in *Unequal Sisters: A Multi-Cultural Reader in U.S. Women’s History*, ed. Ellen Carol DuBois and Vicki Ruiz (New York: Routledge, 1994) 330–40; George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Kevin Mumford, *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

During World War I, several demographic trends converged in Atlanta to heighten the anxieties of reformers and city officials over women's growing presence in public life and their new patterns of work and leisure. Between 1910 and 1920, the population of Atlanta grew from roughly 150,000 to more than 200,000, and the female population of both races increased faster than the male. In 1900 there were already 103.9 white women for each 100 white men and 141.3 African American women for each 100 black men. As the century unfolded, the imbalances increased for both groups.<sup>6</sup>

This increased migration of African Americans and white women caused anxiety among city residents. At the turn of the century, white perceptions that rural African Americans migrating to the city threatened the safety of white citizens helped spur the panic leading to Atlanta's 1906 race riot. In the years leading up to World War I, this growing female presence combined with women's involvement in new forms of commercialized leisure caused reformers to imagine a city spinning out of control. In different ways and with different consequences the race and gender politics of early-twentieth-century white supremacy challenged the rights of African Americans and women to move safely and freely through the city streets and to be a visible presence in the city's public spaces.<sup>7</sup>

World War I created new employment opportunities for working women already in the city and for migrants attracted to the promise of urban life. The demands of wartime shifted patterns in black and white women's employment as men went off to war, leaving their positions vacant. The war enabled some black women to move out of domestic and laundry work and into manufacturing jobs. While both sets of women gained jobs in textiles and clothing manufacturing, white women reflected national trends by moving into white-collar professions like telegraph and telephone operations, clerking and bookkeeping. Wages and purchasing power increased accordingly.

Changing patterns in women's employment also contributed to a rise in boarding and independent female residency among both black and white women. White women sought out boardinghouses like the ones in the Fulton Bag and Cotton Mill Village. African American women employed as domestics

6. Gretchen Maclachlan, "Women's Work: Atlanta's Industrialization and Urbanization, 1897-1929" (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1992), 3-6, 376.

7. See Mark Bauerlein, *Negrophobia: A Race Riot in Atlanta, 1906* (Encounter Books: San Francisco, 2001); Nancy MacLean, "The Leo Frank Case Reconsidered: Gender and Sexual Politics in the Making of Reactionary Politics," *Journal of American History*, 78 (Dec. 1991): 917-48.

and desiring independence from white surveillance chose not to “live in,” preferring to live in black neighborhoods or in black-run boardinghouses located close to their places of work. Since fewer women in their late teens and early twenties lived at home or in their employers’ homes, reformers feared a loosening of the bonds of familial authority and control.<sup>8</sup> To counter fears of “women adrift,” several private institutions tried to provide safe and “moral” housing for these independent working girls and women. The First Congregational Church, an African American church, ran a boardinghouse for young black women. Located near Auburn Avenue, Atlanta’s black commercial district, the boardinghouse was attached to the church parsonage. In 1914, the Churches Home for Girls opened to provide housing for white women working in the central business district. The Churches Home soon expanded to include three homes for working women within walking distance of the central business district. The YWCA also sponsored a boardinghouse for white working women on Spring Street.<sup>9</sup>

The combination of women’s increased engagement with the city and Atlanta’s developing commercialized leisure economy created new settings for women to explore and experience. The many dance halls and cheap theaters lining the streets of Atlanta’s downtown commercial districts and the public parks and amusement parks enticed young women with money to burn, time on their hands, and the freedom that comes with urban anonymity. Atlanta’s two amusement parks, White City (for whites) and Luna City (for blacks), offered thrilling adventures to unsupervised young women, as did vaudeville and burlesque acts at the city’s numerous theaters. The saloons, dancehalls, and cafés of Decatur Street, a section of the city with a reputation for vice, prostitution, and crime, promised more “dangerous” diversions.<sup>10</sup> Having fun, socializing with men outside the controls of a chaperone or a family, dancing the new dances, and drinking alcohol—all these activities attracted women to the new heterosocial youth culture.

When army training camps were established outside Atlanta, the War Department expressed fears that the city’s growing youth culture might pose a threat to young soldiers. It stipulated that soldiers had to be protected

8. Maclachlan, “Women’s Work,” 314, 321.

9. First Congregational Church pamphlet, Slaton Family Papers, Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, Georgia; Maclachlan, “Women’s Work,” 319, 321–22, 325. See also Joanne Meyerowitz, “Sexual Geography and Gender Economy: The Furnished Room Districts of Chicago, 1890–1930,” in *Unequal Sisters*, 194.

10. Hickey, *Hope and Danger in the New South City*, 63–66.

from urban vices: unscrupulous commercial dealers and salespeople, alcohol, prostitutes, and venereal disease. The War Department mandated a five-mile "sanitary zone," a buffer that would serve as a protection from the pleasures and dangers of urban commercial culture, around each training camp.<sup>11</sup> To ensure that social purity would remain central to the training process, the federal government created the Commission on Training Camp Activities (CTCA). On the national level, the members of the CTCA came from organizations like the YMCA, YWCA, the Russell Sage Foundation, and the Playground and Recreation Association of America. In Atlanta, CTCA members came from the Chamber of Commerce, churches, and the YWCA/YMCA. These private citizens achieved new levels of authority, since local branches of the CTCA were invested with some police powers to ensure public morals. In many cities, Atlanta included, the CTCA had the power to remove women suspected of being prostitutes from the sanitary zone and to imprison arrested women indefinitely if they suffered from venereal disease. Bringing social purity under the authority of wartime government gave reformers and private organizations the power to suspend the civil liberties of any woman suspected of being a prostitute.<sup>12</sup>

The War Department saw prostitution and venereal disease as such a danger to the army, indeed to national security, that it threatened to remove camps from areas where commercialized vice and sexually transmitted diseases appeared to flourish. The fears of the War Department quickly developed into a concern for city businessmen who stood to profit from selling Atlanta as the perfect site for an army cantonment. To protect their potential gains, Atlanta businessmen, city leaders, and reformers spearheaded a campaign to repress vice and to develop "moral preparedness" among Atlanta citizens. City residents could support the war not only by conserving food and buying bonds, but also by practicing sexual restraint. This discourse of chaste patriotism served to vilify women, particularly working-class in-migrants.

11. Minutes of the Public Safety Committee, June 3, June 6, June 10, and Sept. 13, 1917, Atlanta Chamber of Commerce Papers, Atlanta, Georgia; Allen Brandt, *No Magic Bullet: A Social History of Venereal Disease in the United States since 1880* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) 53–59; V. H. Kriegshaber, "What the Community Owes to the Soldiers in the Training Camps," *Atlanta City Builder*, Aug. 1917, p.7.

12. See minutes of the Evangelical Ministers Association, Christian Council Collection, and CTCA circulars, Lumpkin Collection, both at Atlanta History Center; Brandt, *No Magic Bullet*, 37; Mary Odem, *Delinquent Daughters, Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995) 121–26; Hickey, *Hope and Danger in the New South City*.



Mayor Asa Candler voiced a popular view when he publicly declared women's increased migration to the city a threat to civic virtue and prosperity. He warned citizens to "recognize the danger of this vicious in-pouring and prepare to checkmate and forestall it before it gains a foothold." In true Atlanta-booster form, the mayor reminded citizens of the economic payoff in maintaining vigilance against the waves of allegedly immoral women: "If we fail in this, the war department has put us on notice that we stand to lose our training camps."<sup>13</sup>

As Mayor Candler voiced concerns about the dangers posed by female migrants, women's club members reshaped the sexualized nature of domestic defense to emphasize that young women needed protection from vice just as much as soldiers did. During the summer of 1917, as Atlanta businessmen generated a moral panic over vice and crime in the city, clubwomen offered a different version of the sexual politics of wartime. Instead of emphasizing the dangers faced by the innocent young soldiers, clubwomen offered the unchaperoned girl as the endangered subject. According to one white clubwoman, protecting young women ought to be included in domestic defense plans for the city "because of the dangers on our streets to young and un-chaperoned girls and because we desire to help the city and military authorities to guard the girls who need protection from either the worst element of the soldiers or their own ignorance and folly."<sup>14</sup> Women reformers, clubwomen argued, ought to be given a central role in controlling the conditions under which young men and women came into contact. Calling on the stereotypical gender roles of the period, these women claimed authority as the guardians of the home and the protectors of moral virtue.

At the same time, however, clubwomen drew on more contemporary discourses to shape their reform work. Like many of their counterparts across the nation, Atlanta clubwomen and female reformers believed that the necessary social engineering could be accomplished through organization and planning. During the war, these women applied social scientific principles to domestic mobilization, hoping to organize city life in such a way that they influenced, or at least restrained, the cultural behaviors of young women and girls.<sup>15</sup>

13. *Atlanta Constitution*, June 17, 1917. See also Kriegshaber, "What the Community Owes," 7.

14. *Atlanta Constitution*, Sept, 1917, found in Atlanta Women's Club Scrapbook, Atlanta History Center.

15. Dorothy Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 149–59.

Female reformers developed a strategy called “girl work” as a way to redirect the cultural styles of young women and to protect them from unwanted male sexual advances. The purpose of girl work, or solving “the girl problem,” was to channel women’s energy away from sexual contact with men and into more wholesome pursuits. Reformers therefore sought to educate young women about sex, create opportunities for them to support the war effort, and provide chaperoned leisure activities like parties and dances for soldiers and young women. Local members of the Committee on Women’s Defense Work, a racially segregated wartime women’s organization, joined with the YWCA and local women’s clubs to organize women’s participation in domestic defense work. The YWCA in Atlanta followed the recommendations set by the national organization and organized racially segregated war work councils and patriotic leagues for young women. Domestic defense work included war support projects for the War Department like bandage rolling, candle making, and kit filling for soldiers at the battlefield. These projects filled the free time of working-class women while helping the war effort. The white YWCA tended to organize young women at work, targeting white-collar workers, department store clerks, and factory workers. Since many black women, excluded from other jobs, worked in the private homes of whites as domestics, African American women organized patriotic league units through their public schools and churches.<sup>16</sup>

In contrast to the male-dominated CTCA, the YWCA took a more forgiving view of young women’s public presence in the city. The goal of female reformers was not to lock women up but to teach them to be chaste and virtuous female citizens. The patriotic leagues took on the job of educating young women on the cultural requirements of female citizenship. League reformers organized lectures and programs that addressed sex education or defined proper moral behavior. These presentations became important social events in wartime Atlanta and drew women from all social groups, from debutantes to factory operatives. Although the African American and white leagues organized racially segregated meetings, both black and white women might discuss topics like *What Is Prostitution? The Meaning of Chaperonage; Sex and*

16. YWCA Minutes, Oct. 12 and Oct. 16, 1917, YWCA Papers, Emory University; typewritten report on relationship between Atlanta women and Adele Ruffin, supervisor of black women’s YWCA work, Mrs. E. J. Landrum, no date, Neighborhood Union Collection, Atlanta University. For information on black and white women’s employment during World War I, see MacLachlan, “Women’s Work,” 90–99; see also Tera Hunter, “Household Workers in the Making: Afro-American Women in Atlanta and the New South, 1861–1920” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1990), 268.

*Venereal Disease Education; What a Mother Should Tell Her Daughter about Sex; and The Purpose of Protective Officers.*<sup>17</sup>

These wartime public discussions of women's sexuality drew a close link between premarital sex and treason. One pamphlet distributed by the Neighborhood Union, a black women's club, argued that couples who engaged in sex before marriage did not display the same level of commitment to each other as married couples; their commitment was cheap and temporary. For the woman, this decline in morality led to further degradation: "she either gives herself up to the enjoyment of cheap pleasures like drinking and immoral actions with any man she likes or else she begins to sell herself to every man who is willing to pay." Inevitably, this course led women into prostitution and, very likely, to infection with venereal disease. The diseased prostitute would infect a soldier, rendering him unfit to fight. The soldier would then give the disease to his wife, who, in turn, would infect their children during the birth process. With her seductive wiles and her diseased body, the urban woman's sexuality was viewed as an instrument of treason, threatening not only the success of the U.S. army but also the very fabric of the American family. Just like the menace of the German Kaiser, women who engaged in sex outside marriage threatened to bring about the downfall of civilization.<sup>18</sup> In this context, public officials linked types of sexual expression, the fact of women living outside the surveillance of family and community, and the rise of commercialized amusements to construct the image of the wartime prostitute.

The sexual politics advanced by African American and white female reformers paralleled the moral politics of male reformers by vilifying the single girl, yet clubwomen challenged male negativity by encouraging women to exercise control over their sexuality rather than submitting to patriarchal authority. Women reformers encouraged women to educate themselves about the dangers of the new mass culture that valued pleasure over responsibility, abandon over restraint, and instant gratification over reasoned consideration. For white women, these discussions were a unique opportunity to advance

17. "What Is the Government Doing for Your Boy? What Are You Doing for the Government? Suggested Programs for Women's Clubs," CTCA pamphlet, Neighborhood Union Collection, Atlanta University; "Report of the Atlanta Women's Public Health Club to the Health and Recreation Department, 1918," Lumpkin Collection, Atlanta History Center.

18. Anna L. Brown, M. D., "Girls—A Home Guard," pamphlet in Neighborhood Union Collection, Atlanta University.

new notions of women's citizenship, a definition of modern female identity that competed with other, less flattering images of women in urban life deployed through the emerging culture of mass consumption.<sup>19</sup>

Yet, at the same time, white women reformers in Atlanta still held on to the popular notion of fundamental gender differences and believed that women's citizenship differed from men's. Whereas male citizenship was historically located in military service and republican virtue, women's identity as citizens combined traditional notions of respectability with a Progressive-era sense of modernity. This notion of the modern was firmly rooted in the beliefs of reformers who espoused the idea that society would be improved (if not made over) by social engineering, the deployment of reason and rational thought, "generalizable laws," and efficiency.<sup>20</sup> Drawing a contrast to the new youth culture and its emphasis on highly individualized pleasures like sexual freedom and excitement, patriotic citizenship for women was linked to socially oriented characteristics like "sound ethics, scientific knowledge, high ideals of womanhood, loyalty to home, friends and government, faithfulness to duty." In short, female reformers imagined women citizens to be modern individuals whose lives and choices were informed by rational thought and obligations to the "national community." YWCA workers made sure to publicize the names of league members who chose patriotic projects like rolling bandages and sewing hospital garments for soldiers over commercialized leisure. These female citizens preferred service to fun and war work to shopping, and they took more interest in community issues than in movie stars and the newest dances.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, in their own ways, female reformers rejected the Victorian notion of separate spheres to root women's citizenship in the public sphere. Yet the early-twentieth-century world of public amusement was not exactly the kind of public sphere they had in mind. Reformers feared that the new world of commercialized amusements posed a significant threat to their ideals of urban

19. See Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), chap. 5: Mumford, *Interzones*, xviii, 157, 158; Erika D. Rappaport, "'A New Era of Shopping': The Promotion of Women's Pleasure in London's West End, 1909–1914," in *The Gender and Consumer Culture Reader*, ed. Jennifer Scanlon (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 43.

20. De Grazia, *The Sex of Things*, 6–7, also Dewey Grantham, *Southern Progressivism: The Reconciliation of Progress and Tradition* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983); William A. Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880–1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

21. YWCA Minutes, 1917–1919, YWCA Papers, Emory University.

stability. Given this, women reformers paid a great deal of attention to how women spent their leisure time. The question of how women used their spare time dominated the “girl work” of the patriotic leagues. In contrast to other discussions of sexuality that associated working-class women with prostitution, these reformers argued that unstructured leisure led to ruin.<sup>22</sup>

Casting their net wider to take in middle-class girls, white reformers expressed anxiety about girls and young women whose class position exempted them from work for wages. These women, it was feared, were even more at risk than working-class women. While working women might be making themselves more visible on the urban landscape, their experience as wage-workers brought a certain responsibility that was perhaps lacking among middle-class women. It appeared that many middle-class girls and young women preferred the amusements provided by consumer culture, flocking to new urban spaces, like department stores and movie theaters, that promoted consumption and pleasure over selling war bonds and other domestic defense work projects. Where working women could be applauded for their commitment to war production, these nonworking women seemed more interested in being part of the urban spectacle. The pursuit of pleasure, an activity that appeared to be nothing but an end in itself, threatened the co-operative war effort envisioned by clubwomen.<sup>23</sup>

White clubwomen called this dilemma the problem of the “unreachable girl.” An article in the *Atlanta Constitution* described the special challenge of this type of girl: “This unreachable girl belongs to that element who have good homes and have everything to make them comfortable . . . who can take trips . . . spend their mornings at home doing what they please and afternoons at the movies, at [the shopping districts] or somewhere on pleasure bent. They are the army of women with no defined interest.”<sup>24</sup>

Reformers feared that unfocused attention combined with too much leisure time spelled trouble for these women, who might fall into immoral activities out of boredom. Unsupervised shopping trips today might lead to visits to a dance hall tomorrow. Who knew if middle-class women’s involvement with urban culture would lead to sexual experimentation or worse? As the aforementioned newspaper article noted, if “they could be reached and given

22. See Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*; Meyerowitz, “Sexual Geography”; Odem, *Delinquent Daughters*.

23. Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City*, 60–61.

24. *Atlanta Constitution*, Sept. 1917, found in scrapbook of Women’s Committee of National Defense, Georgia Department of Defense Papers, Georgia Department of Archives and History, Atlanta, Georgia.

an interest, there would be not so much trouble ahead in the war work council of the YWCA.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, middle-class girls and young women were encouraged to participate in the same types of volunteer work as working girls. Instead of the random sensations provided by the leisure culture, reformers offered domestic defense work as a means to an end, supporting the war effort and providing a positive model for young women.

What kinds of activities did women reformers organize for African American and white Atlanta girls? One white patriotic league met twice a week to knit sweaters and socks, roll bandages, and make trench candles for soldiers. League members ushered at patriotic assemblies and social hygiene lectures, and marched in Red Cross and Liberty Loan parades. However, the patriotic leagues did not frown on all pleasure. They held dances and other mixed-sex recreations, offering alternatives to the dance halls, cheap theaters, and amusement parks of the city. Reformers believed that wholesome popular amusements would attract women and soldiers, and, most important, create opportunities to impart proper moral values. On one occasion, the league held a party in a vacant lot for two hundred soldiers and almost as many girls. Reformers served punch instead of alcohol, and men and women learned folk dances instead of the popular dances of the day, which relied on a great deal of bodily contact.<sup>26</sup>

Clubwomen expressed particular concern about dancing and about organizing the social spaces in which it took place. Organizations like the national Committee on Women's Defense Work (CWDW) focused a great deal of attention on improving the moral character of dancing itself. Reformers in Atlanta received guidelines from the CWDW for organizing dances that would fulfill the desires of young people for entertainment but would also be a form of wholesome recreation. One group of women utilized a pamphlet entitled “Regulation and Suggestion Governing Dances for Soldiers and Sailors.” It warned against the sexual dangers and “bad social conditions” posed by unregulated dancing. The author recognized that, since people would always dance, it was best not to ban dancing but to choreograph wholesome dance steps and organize safe dancing situations.<sup>27</sup>

25. Ibid.

26. Letter to Lumpkin from Boykin, July 8, 1918, and YWCA minutes, 1917–1919, YWCA Papers, Emory University; also “Report of Recreation of YWCA,” by Florence Dow, and “Report of War Work Council of the YWCA,” by Emily McDougald, Lumpkin Collection, Atlanta History Center. For descriptions of black vernacular dance styles of the period, see Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, 175–76.

27. “Regulation and Suggestion Governing dances for Soldiers and Sailors,” Committee on Women's Defense Work, National Archives, Suitland, Maryland, box 553.

The key components for a successful and safe dancing situation included proper dress, the right atmosphere, and chaperones. Reformers recommended a certain style for women that would not encourage lascivious attention from men, favoring brightly colored, modest afternoon gowns over evening gowns with transparent waists or low décolletage. The dance hall was to be well lit to guard against any illicit activities in dark corners or dimly lit side rooms. Black and white reformers intended that dances be educational, good exercise, and cultured; they insisted that, in contrast to popular taste, a “jazz band atmosphere be tabooed.” Young women could not attend unless in the company of a chaperone, who was to bring five to ten girls for whom she was personally responsible throughout the night. To protect women against late-night assignations, no girl was to leave the dance without the chaperone.<sup>28</sup>

Female reformers soon realized that choreographing the social interactions of young women and soldiers required more effort than organizing alternatives to commercialized leisure. They wanted women to have their own public spaces in the city and in the army camps, separate from the uncontrollable and immoral influences of urban mass culture. Thus, a great deal of clubwomen’s war work entailed creating moral havens for young women. This focus on space reveals some key differences between African American and white clubwomen. While both sets of women worked to protect girls from soldiers and soldiers from girls, black women’s work had an additional dimension. The presence of thousands of black soldiers at Camp Gordon raised racial tensions in the city and in the camp. The Atlanta Colored War Work Council attempted to create spaces to keep black men and women safe from racial hostility as well as to create alternatives to commercial culture.

Viewing the city from their relatively privileged vantage points, African American and white clubwomen often linked the built environment to character, believing that one’s surroundings determined values and morals. Therefore, female reformers created new public spaces where women could engage in war work—canning, knitting and mending for soldiers, and rolling bandages—while receiving instruction on issues of morality and proper behavior. According to YWCA leaders, war service in these new spaces would help girls “maintain high standards of personal efficiency and uphold right standards of character and action.” These places, located in the city and on the army bases, should be seen as female zones in male-oriented geographies, since men’s presence was restricted and chaperoned. By creating these spaces, invested as they were with sexual morality, female reformers made it possible

28. Ibid.

for women of all classes to be present in historically male spaces, downtown and the army base, where the female presence was traditionally suspect. In this way, female reformers implicitly challenged the policies of the CTCA, which hoped to keep women off the streets and away from men.<sup>29</sup>

The Peachtree Arcade, the YMCA Recreation Center in downtown Atlanta, and the Hostess Houses at Camp Gordon represented new public spaces that offered women opportunities to organize their charges in the middle of urban and military activities. In 1917, developers built the Peachtree Arcade in Atlanta's downtown as a women's building, hoping to attract female consumers to the central business district. The arcade seemed like the perfect place to relocate the YWCA, since the organization's house on Houston Street was becoming too small for its war work. The central location made the arcade accessible to women working in the nearby factories and to those shopping downtown. With some assistance from the CTCA and the Chamber of Commerce, the YWCA spent thousand of dollars creating clubrooms on the fourth floor where young white working women could hold patriotic league meetings or host parties. White middle-class and elite women also used the arcade to hold meetings, dances, parties, and work projects. In a limited way the arcade represented a unique physical space in a city in which people were almost as segregated by class as by race. During the day, women could take classes in physical exercise, use the bathing facilities, and then eat lunch in the YWCA cafeteria. For working women, this provided a break from daily labor. For nonworking women, the clubrooms offered shoppers and visitors "a nice exclusive place to take their lunches." The cafeteria catered to both groups by offering meals in a wide range of prices.<sup>30</sup>

The arcade provided a space where women of different classes could meet and work together. Following the organizational color line that mandated separate black and white YWCA locals, only white women utilized the new downtown meeting space. This segregation hints at the values and priorities of female reformers. White clubwomen were capable of exercising a sort of benevolent maternalism toward white working-class women, yet they

29. See letter to Z. Nespor, field secretary, National War Department Commission, Atlanta, from Neighborhood Union, July 31, 1917, Neighborhood Union Collection, Atlanta University; "Report of the War Work of the YWCA," 141, Women's Committee on National Defense Papers, National Archives; YWCA Bylaws, YWCA Minutes, November 1917, YWCA Collection, Emory University; Peter Baldwin, *Domesticating the Street: The Reform of Public Space in Hartford, 1850–1930* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999), 6.

30. *Atlanta Constitution*, Sept. 9 and Sept. 23, 1917.



demonstrated very little interest in African American women's war work or safety. While white women contested the sexual politics of white male control in Atlanta during wartime, their lack of interest in African American women's reform work reinforced the cultural and social values of white supremacy. The location of the YWCA's headquarters in the white central business district, where African American women were welcomed only in their capacities as servants and not as consumers, was an emblem of the organization's policies of racial segregation. The physical geography of segregation thus provided a visible reminder of the racism that structured the YWCA.

African American women utilized commercial areas of the city by meeting at the Colored Women's War Work Council office in Atlanta's black business district. While city leaders assisted white YWCA leaders in creating a new meeting space for women, there was no such assistance for black women. The council joined forces with the black YMCA to raise funds for a recreational center in the city. Unlike the arcade, this center was not intended only for women; it represented a community effort to offer alternative recreations and a safe meeting space for both sexes. In a Neighborhood Union meeting, clubwomen discussed the pivotal role the center would play in the community. "We are a home loving people. We therefore have no first-class restaurants and clubhouses, so we have no place for our soldiers to go, when off duty, and the colored YMCA building for which we have struggled so hard has not been completed. So the Women's War Work Council raised this money to help finish the building in order that soldiers might have a wholesome place to go."<sup>31</sup> The community center therefore addressed two issues of central concern to black clubwomen: it would provide wholesome leisure for soldiers, and it would fill the void left by the lack of "respectable" public leisure spaces for African Americans.

The Edgewood Community Center was a two-story building centrally located at the corner of Edgewood and Auburn Avenues, the heart of Atlanta's African American business district. Hoping to undercut the appeal of dance halls and saloons, reformers sponsored chaperoned dances and parties for soldiers and civilians. The assembly hall hosted concerts and other entertainments as well as community meetings. It was accessible to black students at Morehouse College and Atlanta University's Officer Training Corps and also functioned as a drop-in center and clubhouse for both soldiers and civilians.

31. "Records of the Tag Day Drive for the YMCA of the Neighborhood Union," 1918, quoted in Louie Shivery, "The History of Organized Social Work among Atlanta Negroes, 1890-1935" (master's thesis, Atlanta University, 1936), 153; see also financial records of drive in notebooks in Neighborhood Union Collection, Atlanta University.

The lunchroom attracted men and women who either wanted to buy inexpensive lunches from YWCA volunteers or just to use the lunchroom as a gathering space.<sup>32</sup>

Black female reformers envisioned the recreation center as a place where black men and women could engage in wholesome leisure activities. While white clubwomen feared the negative effects of the downtown movie theater, African American clubwomen grappled with more immediate threats of urban life—the flourishing “vice districts” that city officials deliberately relegated to black communities.<sup>33</sup> Black clubwomen intended the recreation center to compete with the commercialized leisure spots in places like Decatur Street, Atlanta’s red-light district. Located in a black community, it was one of the few places in the city in which prostitution, gambling, and other underworld activities flourished with the complicity of the police.<sup>34</sup>

Even beyond Decatur Street, black clubwomen accused the police and city council of turning a blind eye toward the prostitution and liquor trades carried out in their neighborhoods. It infuriated them that the wartime crack-down on the commercial sex trade actually increased the activity of prostitutes and pimps in black neighborhoods, activity ignored by the white police. In a letter to the War Department, the Neighborhood Union commented that prostitution was the one area where the police left black Atlantans alone and demanded that the police and city government enforce vice laws across the color line: “If a policy is determined whereby white prostitutes are driven out of the city, that the same policy be adopted and rigidly adhered to in regard to colored prostitutes.”<sup>35</sup>

As black and white female reformers manipulated the built environment to negotiate race and gender issues in Atlanta, they also worked to make more acceptable the presence of women and African Americans at Camp Gordon, the military base outside the city, by participating in another national YWCA/CWDW wartime movement, the building of black and white Hostess Houses. Designed to provide a “homelike presence” and a “safe and wholesome atmosphere” for soldiers at the camp, Hostess Houses reflected an idealized

32. Ruby Cohron, “A Study of Fifty Volunteer Workers in the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA, Atlanta, Georgia” (master’s thesis, Atlanta University, 1942), 5; John Dittmer, *Black Georgia in the Progressive Era, 1900–1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 194, n44.

33. See Carby, “Policing the Black Woman’s Body,” 751, for a different view.

34. “Records of the Tag Day Drive for the YMCA of the Neighborhood Union,” 1918, quoted in Shivery, “History of Organized Social Work,” 153. See also financial records of this drive in notebooks in Neighborhood Union Collection, Atlanta University.

35. Neighborhood Union Meeting Minutes, list of demands by Atlanta Colored Women’s War Work Council, 1918, Neighborhood Union Collection, Atlanta University.

domestic setting, usually including a parlor, a kitchen, and a bedroom for visiting wives and relatives. The architecture of the Hostess Houses was intended to interject a genteel, feminine quality into the rustic and militarized masculine setting of the army camp.

The range of activities in the Hostess Houses reinforced a maternal presence. Women mended clothes, knitted sweaters, and darned socks for the soldiers. They distributed religious tracts and homemade food. More than just a home away from home for soldiers, the Hostess House also functioned as an educational institution to teach working-class women the middle-class arts of entertaining men. Girls and soldiers who attended tea parties or receptions gained exposure to what one commentator characterized as “the first time experience in high standards of social intercourse.”<sup>36</sup> Reformers worked hard to choreograph the contact between men and women, hoping to challenge the new heterosocial youth culture by imparting genteel middle-class values. As one clubwoman reported, the Hostess House was one of the best places for young people to meet since “there would be every protection thrown around them.”<sup>37</sup>

Like the arcade and the Edgewood Community Center, the Hostess House offered alternatives to what female reformers viewed as typical working-class popular culture: gambling, drinking, sexualized dancing, and of course, premarital sex. Instead, reformers offered soldiers and women entertainments like classic plays, musicals, and concerts. Echoing the discourses of the organized play and recreation movements of the Progressive era, which stressed the value of structured activities over random and spontaneous fun, one black female reformer argued that women’s wartime duties included restructuring the forms of amusement available in the army camp to prevent soldiers from being drawn into unwholesome and immoral activities: “Our women must do their part. Our task is the amusement of the soldier boys. Leisure is a foe to any man, and a foe to the army. Baseball, football, basketball . . . moving pictures and other amusements must be placed in every camp where all may be admitted free.”<sup>38</sup>

While African American and white women shared concerns over unrestricted and unmediated leisure, black women confronted special dangers:

36. YWCA Minutes, Apr. 18, and May 13, 1918, YWCA Papers, Emory University; Shivery, “History of Organized Social Work,” 160.

37. *Atlanta Constitution*, Aug. [?], 1918, found in scrapbook of Atlanta Women’s Club, Papers of Atlanta Women’s Club, Atlanta History Center.

38. “Neighborhood Union Plan of Work for the Colored War Council Committee of Atlanta,” quoted in Shivery, “A History of Social Work,” 147.

army camps located in the South became hotbeds of racial confrontation. For many southern whites, the presence of black soldiers tapped into deep-seated racial fears and hatreds. The very idea of black men in military service violated the racial prerogatives of white male citizenship, an identity based on black inferiority and disarmament. That the federal government was arming African American men appeared to give federal sanction to black male equality. In reality, black soldiers received no training in weaponry and warfare, fated, as they were, to ditch digging and other menial tasks once they reached Europe. Yet for many black soldiers, serving in the army was a demonstration of their citizenship, and the politics and culture of the Jim Crow South violated their sense of entitlement.<sup>39</sup>

Local newspapers increased racial tension by writing stories and reports about the presence of nonsouthern black men, inflaming tensions by depicting African Americans as disloyal to the war effort. The press also exploited white fears of black men by outlining the potential dangers white Atlantans faced from northern blacks not schooled in Jim Crow race etiquette. In fact, the opposite was more likely: on the street cars and the city streets black soldiers experienced harassment and unwarranted arrests. These incidents exacerbated existing racial tensions and in some cases caused black citizens to strike back in defense of black soldiers. For example, on one occasion, a crowd of black citizens helped a black soldier arrested for public drunkenness escape the military police. At Camp Gordon, black soldiers endured indignities and threats of racial violence from white officers and recruits. The discrimination that black soldiers faced extended to their military training. Despite the existence of a black officer's training camp at Atlanta University, all the sergeants who dealt with black troops were white and were chosen because of their prior experience working with black labor gangs. The low status of black troops was further reinforced by their assignment to menial tasks.<sup>40</sup>

African American clubwomen responded to the problems that black soldiers faced in the army camps and in the city by taking advantage of the federal government's need for black support of the war. In 1918, the Neighborhood Union demanded that the War Department address discrimination and mistreatment, outlining the numerous ways that African American citizenship

39. Dittmer, *Black Georgia in the Progressive Era*, 200; see also press clippings in the Tuskegee Institute News Clipping File, microfilm, and Bernard Nalty, *Strength for the Fight: A History of Black Americans in the Military* (New York: Free Press, 1986) chaps. 7 and 8.

40. Dittmer, *Black Georgia in the Progressive Era*, 195–96.

was undermined by the racist practices of white citizens and the racist policies of city government. The women accused the local press of committing treason when it accused black Atlantans of disloyalty. To protect black soldiers from racial violence, the Neighborhood Union demanded that provost guards be stationed in black neighborhoods throughout the city. It called on the public safety commission of the Chamber of Commerce to address the mistreatment of black residents and soldiers on streetcars.<sup>41</sup>

In the spring of 1918, the Neighborhood Union sent a letter to President Woodrow Wilson demanding that the government put an end to lynching. Utilizing the popular rhetoric of the moment, black clubwomen declared that lynching was treason and emblematic of the evil that America was fighting against in Germany. They called on the government to attack an enemy at home “worse than Prussianism” and pointed out that African Americans supported the war at home as civilians and abroad as soldiers. How could the government justify its hypocritical policy of demanding war service from black people and then ignoring the abuses experienced by patriotic citizens? The Neighborhood Union suggested that in exchange for war support the government owed its citizens basic protections. Thus they recommended to President Wilson “while we are sacrificing the best blood of our sons upon our Nation’s altar to help destroy Prussianism beyond the seas, we call upon you to use your high offices to destroy the lynching institution at our doors.”<sup>42</sup>

African American Hostess Houses, in addition to functioning as chaperoned meeting places for men and women, provided a haven from the racial tension and discrimination black soldiers faced in the camp, at the same time they symbolized the marginal position of African American female reformers. As in the case of the Edgewood Community Center, black clubwomen had to raise most of the construction costs of the Hostess House on their own. Its location reflected the segregated social and spatial design of Camp Gordon. The white house was conveniently located in the center of the camp, with a view of the parade grounds. The black Hostess House was not only located on the outskirts of the camp, it was well out of the way of the streetcar stop. Black women had to walk a great distance to get to the Hostess House, often risking harassment from white soldiers. This experience mirrored the unpleasant possibilities African American women risked when

41. Neighborhood Union Meeting Minutes, list of demands by Atlanta Colored Women’s War Work Council, 1918, Neighborhood Union Collection, Atlanta University.

42. Letter to the president, the cabinet, the Congress of the United States, the governors, and the legislatures of several states of the USA, from the Neighborhood Union, Mar. 1, 1918, Neighborhood Union Collection, Atlanta University.

they moved through the segregated city. Only during rush hour were they allowed to ride the camp jitney.<sup>43</sup>

The issue of women's public safety was of particular concern to black clubwomen as racial tensions heightened. The Atlanta Colored Women's War Work Council demanded the installation of more streetlights around the city, especially in black neighborhoods, where women returning home from work after dark were at risk. Black women reformers feared that the influx of black and white soldiers would increase the risk of sexual assault and would prove a "menace to the welfare of the city." In addition to requesting more streetlights, women recommended that employers cooperate and let women leave work before dark.<sup>44</sup>

While African American women expressed concerns about racial and sexual assault, white women appeared more concerned with consensual sex between white soldiers and working-class white women. An interesting aspect of this difference is the lack of discussion among white clubwomen about interracial sex, either consensual or forced. The perceived threat of black male rapists had provided fuel for the city's 1906 race riot. Lynchings and other forms of racial violence spurred by rape accusations were not uncommon in the area. Yet even with so many black men and white working-class women coming to the city, white female reformers were silent on this issue. It seems that Atlanta's race riot had in fact solved the "problem" of interracial sex as far as white clubwomen were concerned. The grisly violence of the riot, which left twenty-five blacks dead and many more injured, attached a high cost to public expressions of black political and social empowerment. If the racial trauma of a city torn apart by murderous frenzy was not enough, following the riot, the disfranchisement of African American men was written into the law, thus robbing black men of the vote in most elections. Given the city's racial repression enforced through a politics of segregation and disfranchisement, it is possible that white clubwomen did not see black men as much of a sexual or a political threat.

The idea that Atlanta was endangered by the presence of large numbers of working-class women, black and white, was more central to the wartime sexual politics advanced by white male political leaders. Sexually active women,

43. "Recommendations," sent to Atlanta Division of the War Department Commission on Training Camp Activities by the Committee on Colored Work of the Women's Council of Atlanta, Neighborhood Union Collection, Atlanta University. See also Shivery, "History of Organized Social Work," 153.

44. Neighborhood Union Meeting Minutes, List of Demands by Atlanta Colored War Work Council, 1918, Neighborhood Union Collection, Atlanta University.

or women suspected of sexual activity, were described by city fathers as “moral filth” and worse.<sup>45</sup> White clubwomen, while unconcerned about the plight of black women, offered an alternative to this sexualization of white working-class women. Rather than branding them as dangerous, white clubwomen provided an avenue for integrating them into a female vision of the orderly city. White female reformers, rooting the politics of respectability in their own vision of modern urban culture, argued that it was not women who corrupted society (or the nation) but mass culture that corrupted women. Commercialized leisure drew women into a web of temptation and provided few possibilities for moral elevation. Resisting this lure required women to adopt the modern values of middle-class citizenship. The dangers posed by amusements and pleasure became antithetical to women’s patriotic citizenship during wartime.

African American women also sought to find a place for black women in the city, and in so doing addressed the issue of African American citizenship. While the system of racial terror that was central to white supremacy made it possible for white women to ignore the presence of black male soldiers, black women feared that wartime mobilization would intensify white racism. Black women were keenly aware that the demands of World War I reintroduced the issue of African American citizenship into the public realm. While the riot of 1906 and the legislation passed in its aftermath had taken away the political rights of black men, the presence of black soldiers threatened to challenge this disfranchisement. African American women feared for the safety of black men, since war service and the wearing of the uniform were assertions of male citizenship. Black women worried that displays of black citizenship would lead to more violence, yet they did not want to buy safety through accommodation. They struck out against the racism of local public officials, law enforcement, and federal army officers by demanding that the president and the War Department recognize and protect black civil rights. They also took advantage of their new positions of power in the YWCA and the CWDW to make some gains for black Atlantans.

Wartime mobilization and domestic defense work offered new possibilities for black clubwomen to create new institutions and safe public spaces. While they sought to mediate the interactions between soldiers and women, black clubwomen saw real threats to their communities stemming from the policies of racist local government and national organizations. Thus African American clubwomen combined cultural values and defense work to provide

45. Kriegshaber, “What the Community Owes to the Soldiers.”

protection for black women. Their efforts, however, confronted not only the dangers of leisure but also the racial discrimination expressed through wartime policies, most particularly the lack of funds available to black women reformers. They addressed problems both internal and external to their communities and challenged a consequence of urban segregation, a lack of safe and respectable commercial amusements. Black clubwomen needed to protect both women and men, and in this way their efforts emphasized a different dynamic than did those of white women. The racial structure of the city shaped women's gender concerns, and for this reason many of the projects created by black women offered protection to black men whose wartime status made them vulnerable in Atlanta's volatile racial climate.

Despite their different responses to the sexual tensions the demands of the war brought to their city, both black and white clubwomen identified the uncontrolled spread of leisure culture as dangerous to the health and welfare of their communities. For these women, leisure functioned as a component of their particular political cultures; thus the focus on amusements worked as a strategy for women to assert citizenship identities for women and African Americans. Using the authority granted them by the federal government, national organizations, and their own grassroots organizations, African American and white clubwomen asserted their own agendas against those of local white men and created new possibilities for women to experience and find their place in the city. They used different aspects of city life to protect the experiences of white women and African Americans of both sexes, who in different ways were often marginalized and threatened by the politics and culture of white male supremacy.



## To See Past the Differences to the Fundamentals

### Racial Coalition within the League of Women Voters of St. Louis, 1920–1946

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*Priscilla A. Dowden-White*

The League of Women Voters might seem an unlikely vehicle in African Americans' struggle for racial equality and citizenship in the twentieth century; however, in a few cities, at least, the league provided African American women an important alternative for race work. The league was the "first white secular organization to show any leadership on the question of race," as historian Anne Firor Scott has observed, yet its racial work is undocumented. The St. Louis chapter of the League of Women Voters included African American women in its membership and organizational structure from its inception in 1919, in stark contrast to other local civic organizations.<sup>1</sup> Ironically, that which has brought the league the most criticism—its adoption of "general reform issues" over more "purely feminist issues"—is what attracted African American women to membership and active participation. For at least the first three decades of the St. Louis league's existence, the organization's goals, structure, agenda, and membership converged to create an example of inter-racial cooperation. This example, it is hoped, will encourage historians to reconsider the League of Women Voters as a viable group in the struggle for women's political empowerment.

1. Anne Firor Scott, *Natural Allies, Women's Associations in American History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 181. This paper is a version of a chapter in "Urban Citizens: African Americans and Social Welfare Activism in Jim Crow St. Louis," currently in progress.

As the successor to the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), the league has been criticized for abandoning feminism and stereotyped as the unfortunate representative of the conservative wing of the woman's movement. Barbara S. Deckard's description of the league is fairly typical.

On the right wing of the women's movement was the League of Women Voters. . . . Its white middle-class membership declared that the fight for women's rights had been won with suffrage. . . . The League did very little for women's rights and focused mainly on child labor laws, minimum wages and hour laws, pacifism and many general reforms. . . . Because it never fought for women's liberation, used conservative tactics, and was generally dull, and because of the hostile political climate, it never gained the allegiance of most American women.<sup>2</sup>

Critics have failed to see the "women's issues" within the league's concentration on so-called general reform, in part, because of a tendency to focus on recognizable events and dates. William H. Chafe has warned against this inclination, which leads us to "become captives of a chronology that deceives more than it informs."<sup>3</sup> Commenting on the lack of any significant women's liberation movement from the mid-1920s to the mid-1960s, Deckard argues,

So strongly had [the suffragists] emphasized the vote, and only the vote, that their successors—like the League of Women Voters—could declare in the 1920s that there was no more discrimination against women and that liberal women should merely fight for general reforms for all people. . . . This lack of interest in the major social, economic, and racial issues alienated radical women, while the hostile social atmosphere prevented them from winning over the moderate women.<sup>4</sup>

Historians, for the most part, have focused on the league's formation out of the vestiges of the NAWSA, while only hinting at the full range of the league's activities afterward. Rosalyn Terborg-Penn has suggested, for example, that the lack of interest in the league among African American women might, in part, have been due to their indifference to the debate over the Equal Rights Amendment, which the national league opposed and the more radical

2. Barbara S. Deckard, *The Women's Movement: Political, Economic, and Psychological Issues* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 287.

3. William H. Chafe, *The Paradox of Change: American Women in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

4. Deckard, *The Women's Movement*, 321.

National Woman's Party supported. And Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham has argued that by the end of the 1920s, "the League of Women Voters had lost, largely by its own choice, the potential for being an important mobilizing force among black women." Although this might have been true at the national level, closer scrutiny must be given to the organization at the state and city levels. The St. Louis chapter, in securing the membership and involvement of African American women from its inception, represented a departure, even from other chapters within the state and region. Not until the late 1930s and late 1940s, respectively, did the Lawrence, Kansas, and Kansas City, Missouri, leagues begin to seriously reflect upon the fact that their chapters did not include African American women.<sup>5</sup>

One exception to traditional interpretations of the LWV is found in Naomi Black's *Social Feminism*. Although race is not a factor in her study, Black's analysis helps to significantly recast narrow portrayals of the league. Black contrasts the "social feminism" ("a focus on values and experience identified with women") of the league with "equity feminism," which seeks to "extend existing belief systems to include the women previously excluded." She writes:

From the start the LWV leadership made the same response to all the goals it inherited—it combined them. The pursuit of women's rights and of social welfare could also become a means of civic education. The problem of gender specificity solved itself because men, as well as the established political mechanisms they continued to dominate, were visibly unresponsive to the issues in question. But it became increasingly clear that policies related to women and children and to the general welfare could motivate at least some women to a political activism they would not otherwise have undertaken. In the process they would learn the attitudes and skills necessary for moving into the greater world of normal politics.

5. Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, "Discontented Black Feminists: Prelude and Postscript to the Passage of the Nineteenth Amendment," in *Decades of Discontent: The Women's Movement, 1920–1940*, ed. Lois Scharf and Joan M. Jensen (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983), 267; Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "In Politics to Stay: Black Women Leaders and Party Politics in the 1920s," in *Women, Politics, and Change*, ed. Louis A. Tilly and Patricia Gruin (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1990), 215. See correspondence from Mrs. George Gellhorn to Mrs. Carter H. Harrison (of Lawrence, Kansas), Nov. 15, 1937; Mrs. Aaron Fischer, president of LWVSL to Mrs. Wilfred Evans, president of the Kansas City League, Nov. 8, 1946; League of Women Voters Interracial Committee Meetings and Reports, 1923–1945, LWV Papers, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, University of Missouri–St. Louis.

Most important, Black views the league's influence on public opinion as a "crucial part of politics because of its impact on agendas and on policies. Such activity is, at the least, a potential challenge to the established system of power."<sup>6</sup> It is here, where Black left off, that the role of the LWVSL assumes its greatest significance.

African American women would not have been attracted to the LWV had the organization not conceived such a broad political agenda. In this regard, white women, like their African American counterparts, exhibited what Elsa Barkley Brown and others have called multiple consciousnesses. Brown argues against the dichotomous thinking that not only inhibits our capacity to view the lives of women of color in their wholeness, but also limits our ability to see the wholeness in the lives and consciousnesses of even white women. "The failure . . . to explore the total consciousness of white women has made class, and especially race, nonexistent categories in much of white feminist theory." In Brown's view, there are no contradictions between the public and domestic spheres. Instead, in "the community and the family; male and female; race and sex struggle—there is intersection and interdependence." Carrie K. Bowles, suffragist and one of the LWVSL's most active members, exemplified this tradition. When asked to speak on her most important contributions to the city, Bowles listed convincing the league that African Americans wanted no segregation of any kind and "rearing a fine family that believed without any compromise in the Negro having full civil rights."<sup>7</sup>

Forging alliances with other reform groups, the national league addressed itself to a wide spectrum of issues. Although the league declared that, with suffrage, women had secured most of their fundamental rights, it continued to work for such measures as equal pay and jury service for women, concerning itself as much with child labor, wages and working hours, and disarmament as with legislation specifically focused on women's rights. The league worked hard to avoid being identified as a lobbying agency for any single group. League representatives repeatedly emphasized that their organization was devoted to the good of the whole nation and not to any special interest. "We of the League are very much for the rights of women," Dorothy Straus, a leader, wrote, "but . . . we are not feminists primarily; we are citizens." When

6. Naomi Black, *Social Feminism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 3, 263, and 301–2.

7. Elsa Barkley Brown, "Womanist Consciousness: Maggie Lena Walker and the Independent Order of St. Luke," *Signs* vol. 14, no. 3 (Spring 1989): 610, 632; "Black Leaders a Generation Ago," Herman Dreer Papers, WHMC/UMSL.

Congress passed a depression-era measure that, in effect, prevented wives of government employees from working in the federal and civil service, the league opposed the bill on the grounds that it infringed on the merit system, rather than because it discriminated against women. In contrast to the narrow authoritarian management of the National Woman's Party, the league sought the maximum possible consensus of its membership before proceeding with any program. Every measure endorsed by league leaders had to be approved by its biennial convention, and before an item could even be inscribed on the league's legislative calendar, it had to be studied for at least a year by the appropriate standing committee.<sup>8</sup>

From the beginning, the league's program embraced a wide variety of issues. In March 1919, the NAWSA held a Jubilee Convention in St. Louis to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary and pay tribute to the movement's pioneers. In the keynote address, President Carrie Chapman Catt called for a "league of women voters as a memorial to suffrage pioneers."

What could be more natural then that women having attained their political independence should desire to give service in token of their gratitude; what could be more appropriate than that such women should do for the coming generation what those of the preceding period did for them; what could be more patriotic than that these women should use their new freedom to make their nation safer for their children and their children's children? . . .

Let us then raise up a league of women voters—the name and form of organization to be determined by the voters themselves; a league that shall be non-partisan and non-sectarian in character.<sup>9</sup>

Although nonpartisan from its inception, the league supported women candidates for political office and promoted education geared to political empowerment, as well as protective legislation. League founders Catt and Maud Wood Park saw the organization as a crucial weapon to encourage women's political participation, but in a "semipolitical" way. When asked in 1920 about the role of the league after suffrage, Catt replied, "In the League of Women Voters we have an anomaly; we are going to be a semi-political

8. William Chafe, *The American Woman, Her Changing Social, Economic, and Political Roles, 1920–1970* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 115; Deckard, *The Women's Movement*, 287.

9. Avis Carlson, *The League of Women Voters of St. Louis: The First 40 Years* (St. Louis: League of Women Voters of St. Louis), 2–3.

body. We want political things; we want legislation; we are going to educate for citizenship. In [the league] we have got to be non-partisan and all-partisan to educate." Catt encouraged league members to join the political parties of their choice as well as to actively participate in the league. "You must convert your respective parties to have confidence in you and confidence in the League. I warn you that there is about one man in twenty-five who will be big enough to understand that a Democrat can work with a Republican in a non-partisan body and be loyal to their respective parties!"<sup>10</sup>

While the national league remained steadfast in its commitment to non-partisanship, the historian of the LWVSL observed that "for local Leagues circumstances often seemed very 'special' and the pressures at least to support or oppose certain candidates [and certain issues] were often heavy." For example, in 1922, during local elections, the St. Louis league announced that because it believed the fields of health, justice, and education should not be under party control, it felt free to support or oppose candidates in these three areas, but no others, "except in emergencies."<sup>11</sup> Local conditions and issues also played major roles in the St. Louis organizers' decision to admit African American women, a decision that likely was prompted by the increasing strength of the city's African American voting bloc.

The fact that African Americans had the ballot made politics important to their community and also distinguished St. Louis from cities in the lower South and from some border cities. Although the African American community had been actively engaged in the city's political struggles since Reconstruction, the political impact of the Great Migration on urban communities outside the South quickly became apparent. Despite many attempts by some state legislators, Missouri's urban black population, at least, never faced a serious threat of disfranchisement. In 1912 there were 10,458 African American registered voters citywide. That number would more than triple, to 34,075, by 1924. In 1932, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected, 46,000 of the city's 400,000 registered voters were African American. The growing African American registration in Missouri's large cities, coupled with a series of close statewide elections, caused both parties to take interest in African American voters.<sup>12</sup>

10. Mary Gray Peck, *Carrie Chapman Catt: A Biography* (1944; reprint, Westport, CT: Hyperion Press, 1976), 325.

11. Carlson, *The League of Women Voters of St. Louis*, 26.

12. See "Negro Voting List to Be Scrutinized," *St. Louis Republic*, Sept. 28, 1912; "Total Registration by Wards as Compared to Four Years Ago," LWV Papers, 1928–1936,

African American women were invited to join the LWVSL during a decade of demonstrated growth in African American political awareness. For example, in 1919, a group of black professional men, angered by the fact that black St. Louisans held no public offices, received the most menial of political patronage, and made no major decisions affecting their own community, formed the Citizen's Liberty League. The group immediately approved a proposal with a list of demands, including a Negro congressman to represent Missouri in Washington, D. C.; the election of a judge, constable, and ward committeeman; the election of a Negro committeewoman (if women obtained the right to vote and hold office in time for the next election, or as soon as possible after women received the right); a black fire department; a black superintendent of garbage collection; blacks on grand and petit juries; a black city undertaker (to bury paupers); black uniformed policemen; a black on the board of education; and a city hospital staffed entirely by black medical professionals.<sup>13</sup>

Equally resolute, newly enfranchised African American women immediately became influential in the growth and development of black political consciousness. In 1920, African American women made up nearly half of the 50,381 black citizens of voting age in the city. Within four years, 12,703 of the 34,075 African Americans registered to vote were women. The league provided them with an essential vehicle for political expression. Historian Deborah Gray White has observed that by the 1920s, the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) no longer provided effective leadership for African American women's political activities; it maintained official nonpartisanship in an effort to minimize political conflict. Yet this form of "non-partisanship" manifested an apolitical tone as distinct from the league's non-partisanship, which expressed itself in an all-partisan agenda. St. Louis resident and former National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) national chairman Margaret Bush Wilson suggests that this concern with nonpartisanship was not limited to the NACW, but was also a fea-

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WHMC; Thomas J. R. Wilson to Edward F. Goltra, Oct. 11, 1932, Missouri Historical Society; and *New York Herald-Tribune*, Aug. 7, 1936.

13. Merle Fainsod, "The Influence of Racial and National Groups in St. Louis Politics (1908-28)" (master's thesis, Washington University, 1929), 115, 143; Lawrence O. Christensen, "Black St. Louis: A Study in Race Relations" (Ph.D. diss., University of Missouri-Columbia, 1972). For more on the Citizens Liberty League, see Herman Dreer, "Negro Leadership in St. Louis, a Study in Race Relations" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1955), 146.

ture of the NAACP. "Black people had this thing about being non-partisan in a way that I never understood. Why wouldn't you want to get involved in politics? Of course, this had changed by the time I became actively involved in the NAACP."<sup>14</sup>

African American clubwomen living in urban areas were forced to find alternative political outlets. In St. Louis, the League of Women Voters would become a critical liaison within the city's wide spectrum of competing civic groups, as African American civic organizers fought to improve the social welfare of the race. Initially, the league maintained the Progressive-era tradition of racial separation within women's organizations. As the LWVSL was slowly coming into being, Beatrice Grady was recruited to start a "colored division"; in 1919, she enlisted twelve African American women for the "colored division," women "who could take this work to their own group." Grady and Carrie K. Bowles had formed ties with local white women during their work on behalf of woman suffrage.<sup>15</sup> Among those most active, Grady remembered, were Mrs. C. K. Robinson, Mrs. George E. Stevens, Mrs. T. J. Nevins, Fannie Peck, Julia Childs Curtis, Susie Williams Jones, Mrs. J. T. Breedlove, Carrie K. Bowles, and a Mrs. Huffman. On October 20, 1920, the "colored division" was formally named the Colored Committee of the League of Women Voters in St. Louis.<sup>16</sup>

Most of the first African American members of the league were affiliated with the St. Louis Association of Colored Women's Clubs and were members of the Booklovers Club. Founded in 1907 by Carrie Bowles and Josephine Stevens, the Booklovers Club of St. Louis was modeled on a similar group in Kansas City. While its stated purposes were study and intellectual stimulation, its members were actively engaged in religious, charitable, and social work in a variety of venues, and they were fierce advocates of education. The occupations of the Booklovers and their husbands reflected the spectrum of stable working-class and professional occupations within the larger African American community. In 1925 at least sixteen Booklovers or their husbands were teachers in the St. Louis public schools. The six unmarried

14. Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load, Black Women in Defense of Themselves 1894–1994* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 134–35; Margaret Bush Wilson to the author, Apr. 29, 2004.

15. Carlson, *The League of Women Voters in St. Louis*, 17.

16. Beatrice Grady interview with Herman Dreer, c. early 1950s, Herman Dreer Papers, WHMC/UMSL; Mrs. Harry Carlson, "League of Women Voters in St. Louis, the First Decade," *Missouri Historical Society Bulletin* 26 (1969), 38.



members were all teachers. The husbands of the others included a minister, a realtor, a physician, a post office clerk, and two porters.<sup>17</sup>

The city's civic leaders—white and black reformers who were committed to interracial civic work—helped attract African American women to the league. The organization's white charter members could not deny the demonstrated and potential impact of the African American community's increasing political engagement. Still, the decision to admit African American women was not unanimous, as Beatrice Grady recalled, "It was Mrs. [Edna] Gellhorn's vote that broke [the] tie that they have a Negro on [the] Board. [The] League of Women Voters had its first try out here." Grady remembered the letter inviting her to join the league stated, "We're all ignorant; we all have to learn; so we might learn together." Gellhorn's impact here, and on the chapter's racial work in general, proved significant.<sup>18</sup>

Born into a prominent and socially active St. Louis family in 1878, Edna Gellhorn was the daughter of Washington Fischel, a professor of clinical medicine at Washington University and founding president of the Bernard Skin and Cancer Hospital, and Martha Ellis Fischel, a pioneer of the women's club movement. A founding member of the Adelphi Club, the Wednesday Club, the Women's Club of St. Louis, and the Missouri Federation of Women's Clubs, she (along with her husband) was also a charter member of the Ethical Society of St. Louis. Martha Fischel also participated in the Humanity Club, the Provident Association, and chaired the board of the Charity Commissioners of St. Louis. The Fischels set a high standard for their children. Edna graduated from Bryn Mawr College in 1900 and returned to St. Louis, where in 1903 she married George Gellhorn, a recent emigrant from Germany and her father's medical protégé. Together, they raised four children.

Edna Gellhorn joined her mother in many civic campaigns, but she found her own calling in the women's suffrage movement. From 1910 until the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1919, she was an officer in both the St. Louis and Missouri Equal Suffrage Leagues. When full national suffrage gave birth to the League of Women Voters, Carrie Chapman Catt asked Gellhorn to serve as its first president, calling her "the best suited to the task of any woman I know in the country." Gellhorn declined this position, citing family duties; however, she accepted the first vice chairmanship of the national

17. Katherine T. Corbett, *In Her Place: A Guide to St. Louis Women's History* (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press, 1999), 237–38.

18. Herman Dreer interview with Beatrice Grady, c. early 1950s, WHMC/UMSL.

organization and the presidency of the Missouri LWV. Gellhorn would later serve another term as state president and three terms as president of the St. Louis chapter.

Under Gellhorn's leadership, the LWVSL, rather than change its policy of admitting African American members, withdrew in 1921 from a confederation of St. Louis women's groups. Gellhorn consistently proved her commitment to equal treatment of African Americans, often breaking the city's racial taboos. She hosted African American organizers in her home in the 1920s. Her speaking calendar was full throughout the 1930s and 1940s with engagements before African American civil rights organizations, churches, and women's clubs. When the College Club split in the 1940s over the issue of admitting African Americans, Gellhorn joined the faction advocating open membership and lent her name as the club's founder to a lawsuit over the disposition of club property. Gellhorn served on the boards of the Urban League and the racially integrated People's Art Center, and on the Homer G. Phillips Hospital Advisory Committee. During the 1930s, Mayor Bernard Dickman appointed her to the committee to mediate the Funsten Nut Company Strike (where black and white female workers protested their meager wages), and in 1943 Gellhorn was appointed to the mayor's race relations committee.<sup>19</sup>

Just as critical as some white leaguers' commitment to interracialism was the shared perspective by those African American women who decided to join the group. Booklovers cofounder Carrie K. Bowles, also a charter member of the league's colored committee, remained active in the organization until her death in 1942. Born in the small Quaker village of Selma, Ohio, in 1873, where she was educated in interracial public schools, Carrie K. Johnson regularly attended the Friends' Sabbath School. She graduated from a Chicago normal school and taught in Red Wood and El Dorado, Illinois, and in Bastrop, Prairie View, and Austin, Texas, throughout the 1890s. In 1902 she moved to East St. Louis, Illinois. There she married Benjamin F. Bowles, the principal of Lincoln High School and a widower with three children. She was among the first professionally trained African American social workers in St. Louis and the first professional caseworkers for the Provident Association (the city's major social welfare organization), and she served as a Red Cross volunteer. Bowles was one of a cohort of African American social workers assisting the thousands of stranded black refugees who fled East St. Louis after the racial violence in 1917. The Bowleses and their five children also

19. Susan Beattie in Corbett, *In Her Place*, 233–35.

left; they resettled in St. Louis, where the couple had long been active in civic and social affairs.<sup>20</sup>

Although African American women enrolled in some league chapters, most chapters were not racially integrated. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham has observed that while individual black women held membership in some predominantly white leagues, separate black leagues operated in the cities of Oakland, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Chicago, as well as in St. Louis. Although Higginbotham states that the LWVSL organized its “Colored Committee to bring before the larger body racial concerns related to education, health, child welfare, and citizenship,” the committee, too, was included among the “separate black leagues.”<sup>21</sup>

The role of race and the function of the colored committee within the LWVSL were complex and not easily discernable, partly obscured by the city’s larger patterns of race relations and partly by the league’s complex organizational structure, with its array of committees, study groups, and organizational experiments. Black and white women belonged to separate league structures yet worked closely together, mainly, though not exclusively, on issues concerning the social welfare of African Americans. Though established as a “separate structure with its own set of officers,” the colored committee was accorded permanent status in 1922; it became one of the standing committees of the city’s league chapter, with representation on the executive committee. The colored committee typically donated between \$150 and \$200 to the LWVSL’s yearly budget from funds raised in an annual fashion show it cosponsored with the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA. As a totally self-supporting organization, this local league relied on membership dues, fundraising activities, and, for about a decade, on money taken in by the Economy Shop, its thrift store run by volunteer workers, among them colored committee members.<sup>22</sup>

While the LWVSL was one of the earliest traditionally white organizations to encourage black membership, its racial character mirrored the city’s larger patterns of race relations. Draconian in its iteration of American apartheid championed by those whites who would construct it as a southern city, St. Louis at the same time was shaped by the heirs of New England abolitionism, who had long had an opposing presence in the city. A glaring example of how white leaguers tended to accommodate the racism and prejudice of

20. Biographical Sketch on Carrie K. Bowles, Fannie Cook Papers, MHS, box 18/folder 16. Also see Corbett, *In Her Place*, 237.

21. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “In Politics to Stay,” 213.

22. Carlson, *The League of Women Voters in St. Louis*, 19; see Minutes of the Colored/Interracial Committee, LWV Papers, WHMC/UMSL.

their influential counterparts, and expected African American leaguers to do the same, is revealed in correspondence between St. Louis and Lawrence, Kansas, league officials in 1937:

As St. Louis is half a southern city, there are certain social meetings where the colored members are not included, not because the League wishes to have it so, but just because it is better that we should not offend too many of our prejudiced groups. For instance, there is to be a meeting in the very beautiful home of one of our members when Mrs. Beatrice Forbe[s]-Robertson Hale is to speak. Though colored members of the league will received announcements of this meeting, as will all other members, I doubt very much whether the question will be raised of their attendance. They are as proud as can be and never wish to intrude where they have reason to believe their presence would embarrass anyone.<sup>23</sup>

How then could Carrie Bowles praise the LWVSL for being “one of the very few leagues in the U.S. in which the colored members enjoy every privilege of the organization on terms of absolute equality”? Remembering Bowles as “radical, but with the heart of the Christ,” Edna Gellhorn recalled that when Bowles initially began working with the league as a charter member, she “was very bitter toward whites,” believing that the desperate plight of African Americans “should be corrected immediately in all directions. However, as she came to know us and saw that we were earnestly working to correct all these wrongs, she sympathized with us.” Bowles’s assertion that black members were treated as equals should not be dismissed as politeness, nor is it merely an indication of African American women’s powerlessness in the face of the society’s racial customs. Among the many tributes offered upon her death in 1942, Bowles was remembered for being “no opportunist who pretended allegiance or approval she did not feel. She was always able to see past immediate differences to [the] fundamentals.” For African American women, league activities that were purely social were not among their fundamental concerns.<sup>24</sup>

23. Edna Gellhorn to Mrs. Carter H. Harrison, Nov. 15, 1937, LWV Colored/Interracial Committee Records, 1923–1945, WHMC/UMSL.

24. Carrie Bowles, “Defends League of Women Voters,” undated article (c. 1920s), *St. Louis American*; also Carrie Bowles, “Women Voters’ National League,” *National Notes*, both in Higginbotham, 213. Also see Higginbotham, “Club Women and Electoral Politics in the 1920s,” in *African American Women and the Vote, 1837–1965*, ed. Ann D. Gordon, et al. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 147–48; Edna Gellhorn quoted in Dreer, “Negro Leadership in St. Louis,” 168; tribute to Bowles in “League of Women Voters of St. Louis to the City Editor,” July 6, 1942; also see *St. Louis American*, July 10, 1942.

African American leaguers were well aware of the accommodation of white supremacist views. While some white leaguers did not desire, and none may have expected, members of the colored committee to attend the reception for Beatrice Forbes-Robertson Hale, it is likely that African American members did not care to attend this function anyway. With their own social networks firmly cemented, African American women did not waste time being insulted over such matters. In fact, twelve years earlier, the colored committee had held court with Hale at one of the most impressive institutions in the African American community—Poro College. Hale's lecture was one of the proudest accomplishments of the committee's 1924–1925 year. The open meeting, along with informational talks through organized groups, brought in over 100 new members, boosting African American LWV membership to 350 members.<sup>25</sup>

Bowles and Gellhorn were politically and socially active in a city that came close to realizing the separate but equal principle in the support and funding of parallel social welfare institutions, particularly in education and health for blacks and whites. This situation was the result of a consensus reached in the public realm. An array of organizations, in which the league was among the most highly regarded, attempted to influence the municipal government's decisions on the creation or expansion of social welfare institutions and services. Thus colored committee members joined the league because they viewed it as a viably supportive network through which to continue and develop their racial work. Membership in the league's "colored division" reportedly reached a height of 1,800 during the interwar years.<sup>26</sup>

For African American women, enjoying every privilege of the organization on terms of absolute equality did not mean being received in white homes; it meant never having to suffer public embarrassment over racial discrimination. On this score, the LWVSL took up the challenge of racial injustice in a way that few of its white counterparts locally or nationally were doing. At its annual meeting in 1921, the league voted to withdraw from the Eighth District Federated Clubs, because it had been notified that to remain affiliated it must drop its Negro members.<sup>27</sup> The St. Louis league also adopted a policy

25. See Report of the Year's Work—1924–1925, Colored Committee, LWV Papers, WHMC/UMSL.

26. Carlson, *The League of Women Voters*, 19.

27. Ibid., 20. Other organizations belonging to this network were the Board of Religious Organizations, Daughters of the American Revolution, Council of Jewish Women, Women's Trade Union League, Mother's Congress, College Club, and the Catholic Woman's Club.

of never having a business meeting in any place where black members were barred. This policy was sorely tested at the Hotel Chase in 1939, when two new members attempted to attend a league meeting. One of the women later wrote to the organization's president:

I accepted your cordial welcome to membership in the League . . . hoping to find my membership both interesting and educational. It is with sincere regret, that I must inform you of a most humiliating incident due strictly to my race or color.

. . . (Mrs. Boisson) and I, two Negro women, were denied the common courtesies of human beings by members of the staff of the Hotel Chase; when other "white women" were carried up the elevator and I saw the lady who came to escort us up the stairs, come down on the elevator.

The previous actions and stands taken by the League had won my admiration and respect but this incident truly did much to disillusion me and Mrs. Boisson.

I do feel that on the "square" we should have been instructed as to just how to have reached the League room. Knowing this . . . would have avoided this embarrassment.

I had pictured the League of Women Voters of St. Louis a pioneer in respects to its stand taken for "right" and "justice."

But in view of this incident, one not fully acquainted with the inner workings of the organization, one must question the cordiality of your invitation to "come and visit" often at the League Office.<sup>28</sup>

This was not the only occasion on which black leaguers were not afforded "common courtesies" at the city's league headquarters. In 1941, after the colored committee threatened to withdraw its membership due to the discriminatory treatment of members at the Hotel Chase, the league chose to move its office.<sup>29</sup> Over the years, the league's response in these particular situations became legend and drew praise, particularly from African American organizers. Yet it was the league's general program and mission that sustained African American women's interest in the organization during the interwar period. The colored committee worked to "present to the City League . . . racial problems of education, health, child welfare, citizenship or . . . other

28. Mrs. N. C. Casey to Miss Jeanne Blythe, Oct. 21, 1939, Minutes of the Colored (Interracial) Committee, LWV Papers, WHMC/UMSL.

29. See correspondence from Nathella S. Bledsoe, chairman of the Interracial Committee to Miss Jean Blythe, president of the LWVSL, LWV Papers, Colored (Interracial) Committee, WHMC/UMSL. Also see John T. Clark to Mrs. George Gellhorn, president of the LWVSL, Urban League Papers, Special Collections, Washington University.

problems included in the League program, and to act as an intermediary between the organization and the great body of colored women of the city.” Colored committee members brought with them a wide organizational framework through which their goals could be accomplished. As members of the Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs, YWCA, Mother Craft, the Urban League, and various religious, industrial, and educational groups, black leaguers sought “the confidence and co-operation of larger groups of [their community].” They relied heavily on black women’s clubs for membership and financial support. Most important, black clubwomen were a bridge by which the league’s concerns and those of the African American community could be joined. In 1923 the committee appointed Mrs. C. K. Robinson chair of a committee on interlocking relations with the Federated Colored Women’s Clubs. Cooperation with the Colored Women’s Clubs, YWCA, and other organizations to carry out its election and legislative program brought the league wider recognition within the African American community in 1924.<sup>30</sup>

During that same year, black and white leaguers journeyed to Jefferson City, Missouri, to organize “the first group of colored university girls in the country” for the league, recruiting young women from Lincoln Institute. Julia Childs Curtis looked after this new group during its early years. The colored committee also worked closely with the Colored Women’s College Club of St. Louis, which listed forty members in 1928. That year, the club decided to take up a study of the league’s program as part of its regular work. One of its first successful projects, wholeheartedly supported by the league, was a fund-raising campaign to assist Lincoln Institute in acquiring university status. The colored committee was also responsible, along with the Urban League, for establishing Turner School for Handicapped Children. In 1925, Beatrice Grady reported of the committee’s work: “We have aroused a few hundred women to their civic responsibilities. How to reach the thousands is our greatest problem.” This was a problem that women of all groups, irrespective of race and class, would share in their various organizations for years to come. The colored committee attempted to meet this challenge during the interwar period through a program of “intensive organization and education.”<sup>31</sup>

30. Report of the Colored Committee of the St. Louis League of Women Voters, 1923–1924, May 12, 1929; Minutes of the Colored Committee, May 31, 1923, WHMC/UMSL; Colored Committee, Report of the Year’s Work, 1924–25, WHMC/UMSL.

31. The names of Mrs. Muchall and Mrs. Gellhorn are highlighted in this effort; Report of the Colored Committee, 1923–1924; Minutes of the Colored Committee, Oct. 15, 1924; Minutes of the Colored Committee, Dec. 6, 1928; Colored Committee, Report of Year’s Work—1924–1925; LWV Papers, WHMC/UMSL.

Decades before the freedom schools of the civil rights movement, the league developed and operated citizenship schools and information bureaus, which the colored committee used to educate African American women and their communities about political issues and the importance of voting. These citizenship schools were conducted at community institutions such as the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA and Poro College “to inform our people more about our Governor and to know just how to use the ballot, the primary election being more complicated.” Committee members were motivated by the belief “that every woman wants to render to her government the patriotic service of intelligent voting; that many women do not feel qualified to do this because of lack of knowledge necessary for an intelligent vote.” The colored committee also used the national league’s Get Out the Vote campaigns—the first of which was held in 1924—to register and educate African American voters. At the committee’s February 21, 1924, meeting, members decided to ask the City Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs to get 25 persons to pledge to call 10 others and remind them to vote on February 26, thus making contact with 250 voters. Sixteen of the YWCA secretaries had earlier promised to work their blocks and two Republican women had promised to work their precincts. In 1928, the committee began regular talks on education for citizenship at the monthly meetings of the City Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs.<sup>32</sup> Throughout the interwar period, the colored committee maintained a continuous program of voter service in the African American community.

The league’s focus on general reform issues fit neatly into civic efforts among African Americans to lessen the impact of racial discrimination on black life. With the onset of the Great Migration of blacks out of the Deep South, few social welfare issues touched the daily lives of African Americans more closely than health-care and educational opportunities. The league provided one of few arenas in which African American women could weigh in on major public policy issues. Vanessa Gamble notes that “the campaign to improve the status of black hospitals was led by men.” She goes on to say, “Women were willing workers for the movement, but because of sexual discrimination, no women became visible leaders and spokespersons in the organizations associated with the hospital reform movement.”<sup>33</sup> In

32. Minutes of the Colored Committee, Jan. 27, 1925, WHMC/UMSL; 1928 Report of the Colored Committee of the St. Louis League of Women Voters, WHMC/UMSL; Minutes of the Colored Committee, Feb. 21, 1924; Minutes of the Colored Committee, Dec. 6, 1928.

33. Vanessa Northington Gamble, *Making a Place for Ourselves: The Black Hospital Movement, 1920–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), xiv.



St. Louis, however, the league enabled black women to claim a more political role.

Acting as a study group throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s, the colored committee worked diligently to expose the harmful effects of racial discrimination on black health care. The city's hospitals, including its public hospitals, were all racially segregated. In the early 1920s, when the league began conducting surveys of public health-care facilities and services, it emphasized the especially inferior conditions at, and odd categorizing of African American females in, City Hospital No. 1, the public hospital established primarily for white use. An earlier study, conducted in 1911 by the St. Louis Committee for Social Service among Colored People under the direction of Dr. W. P. Curtis (whose wife was a colored committee member), had discovered that areas designated for African Americans at City Hospital No. 1 were "most inferior, unsanitary, and poorly ventilated." African American males were placed in the basement wards with one nurse assigned to those wards. All African American women were sent to prison wards, regardless of their social condition or disease.<sup>34</sup>

The league's additional findings served to highlight the discriminatory treatment of African American female patients. A large proportion of hospitalized women suffered from gynecological disorders, which usually required surgical treatment. The league observed, "After an operation it is impossible for the patient immediately upon discharge from the hospital, to resume her normal activities. A period of convalescence is always desirable. It is the function of the social worker to secure convalescent care where necessary. It is readily available for white persons but the colored population are entirely lacking in such facilities."<sup>35</sup>

The report also called attention to the treatment of African American females as "public health prisoners" in the city hospital, where the league found nineteen patients ranging from thirteen to forty years of age. Only the underage delinquent girls received any follow-up attention; they were turned over to the juvenile court upon discharge.<sup>36</sup>

34. Minutes of Meeting of Committee for Social Service among Colored People, Feb. 7, 1911, Urban League Papers, SC/WU.

35. Survey of Health Conditions in St. Louis, LWVSL, 1923, WHMC/UMSL.

36. Ibid. The use of the term *prisoner* by hospital authorities during the period is ambiguous. For example, at City Hospital No. 2 "a large number of accident cases are included since the injured person is considered under arrest." Conference between Dr. McClellan, Dr. Hampton and Father Schwitalla, July 14, 1933, St. Mary's Infirmary and City Hospital No. 2 folder, Health Science Center Library/St. Louis University.

As the Great Migration swelled the black population, it became increasingly obvious that St. Louis's only black public hospital, City Hospital No. 2, could not adequately address the needs of the community. "It is a well-known fact," the league's survey observed, "that City Hospital #2 is entirely inadequate in space and equipment for meeting the situation created by [the] recent large influx of colored patients. Consequently the institution is in a chronic state of overcrowding."<sup>37</sup> The St. Louis Community Council, the Tuberculosis and Health Society, the Urban League, the LWV, and various other public service organizations agreed that the health of the entire city would be threatened without an additional African American hospital facility.

The passage of the 1923 bond issue (which earmarked over a million dollars for a new black public hospital) reflected a general consensus on this need. Following passage of the bond issue, Nelson Cunliff, director of public welfare, told the *St. Louis Star*,

If present plans work out, City Hospital No. 2, the municipal institution for negroes, may be replaced in fourteen or fifteen months by a modern hospital structure. As to the site of this institution, it must be east of Grand boulevard, between the Mill Creek Valley and Franklin Avenue. [However], one site which is now considered is in the vicinity of the Sumner High School on Cottage between Good and Pendleton. . . . Other sites also are under consideration. It is to be hoped that one of them will be acceptable to the negroes as well as to the white people.<sup>38</sup>

The proposed site needed the approval of the Citizens' Supervisory Bond Issue Committee, the board of estimate and apportionment, and the board of public service. "If things run smoothly," Cunliff announced, "the new institution could be ready in a year."<sup>39</sup> Things did not run smoothly. The \$1,200,000 appropriation proved insufficient, but the central issue that delayed construction of the hospital was a public debate over the location that lasted nearly a decade. There was a sharp racial divide within the league and in the city at large. One of the most revealing accounts of the racial underpinnings of this issue was described in "Black Liberty," a short story written in the 1930s by Fannie Cook, a white member of the league:

37. 1923 League of Women Voters Health Standards Survey, WHMC/UMSL.

38. *St. Louis Star and Times*, undated article (likely published in 1923), Health and Welfare Scrapbook, WHMC/UMSL.

39. *Ibid.*

On that issue—the location of the new Negro Hospital—[Mrs. Adams] locked horns with everyone from the Mayor down to me. Back of her, the entire colored community pulled together. Usually the Negro citizens are divided in their opinions, some backing each side of a many-sided problem, but this time they were united.

Against them—also united—the white community lined up in opposition. This unanimity was even more unusual. Shoulder-to-shoulder stood white doctors who thought all colored men should be porters, other white doctors who habitually sacrificed their personal advantage in order to extend courtesies to their colored confreres, white politicians who thought Negroes were just people from whom to buy votes, and white women who were used to working on committees with Mrs. Adams.<sup>40</sup>

Public records further illuminate the racial contours of the location debate. Most accounts followed the lines of a report issued by the American Public Health Association, which described the opposing views of the municipal government and the colored community: the Department of Public Welfare, the St. Louis Medical Society, a “limited number of Negroes,” and a considerable number of whites, called for the hospital to be located adjacent to City Hospital No. 1 and to be operated as an integral part of that institution. From a financial standpoint, the location of the new Negro hospital at City Hospital No. 1, would mean “large savings in initial investment and annual savings in operating cost, as many of its . . . departments [were] of sufficient capacity or could be enlarged at relatively [little] cost, to serve an additional hospital unit of 300 to 400 beds.”

The American Public Health Association, however, overlooked an integral part of the dispute—the structural development plans of the city and the institutional and community development plans of the African American community. The majority of African American physicians and citizens favored building a complete facility in, as the report described, “a northwest section of the city in a neighborhood of well-to-do colored families, but distant from districts where the great bulk of the negro population live.” This side, likewise, argued that the location of City Hospital No. 1 was unsuitable for a

40. Excerpt from “Black Liberty,” Fanny Cook Papers, Missouri Historical Society. Mrs. Cook was highly regarded by black organizers “as a true friend.” In 1937, Sidney R. Williams, industrial secretary of the Urban League of St. Louis, stated, “she gave evidence of having deep insight into the problems of the Negro people,” referring to Mrs. Cook’s work on a conference on the “Negro Domestic Worker” and other conferences “covering practically every phase of Negro Life.” See Sidney R. Williams to Catherine Goss, of *Scribners Magazine*, Aug. 16, 1937.

hospital of any kind, that it was not centrally located and was in a manufacturing and railroad district.<sup>41</sup>

In 1928, as the debate over the new Negro hospital heated up, the board of aldermen's vote was heavily courted. That year, the LWVSL Colored Committee voted unanimously to make its opinion known to the mayor, the director of public welfare, and the board of aldermen. Taking the position that the new City Hospital No. 2 should be erected separately and away from City Hospital No. 1, the colored committee declared that "since the principle of segregation of hospitals has been established the separation should be complete. Only in this way can the colored people of St. Louis be assured of the benefits to be gained by such a plan." These benefits would be threefold: a colored hospital would be managed entirely by colored physicians, and it would include hospital training for both colored interns and colored nurses.<sup>42</sup>

The committee believed that an entirely separate black hospital would come closer to providing "equal" care than a facility under white administration and supervision. The protracted battle—which African American social welfare organizers eventually won—involved juggling the goal of full citizenship with that of maximizing African American benefits under Jim Crow. Some opponents of segregation, including white members of the league, found the concept difficult to grasp; thus, the colored committee's official public stance on the location of the new Negro hospital was made without the league's sanction.

When the Negro hospital debate reached the St. Louis Community Council for consideration, conflicting interpretations among allies continued to be a problem. Formed during the Progressive era to coordinate social welfare efforts for the sake of efficiency, the council (to which the league belonged through the mid-1930s) functioned as the municipal group charged with the difficult task of fact-finding and garnering and sifting through public opinion on nearly every significant social welfare issue.<sup>43</sup> Highly structured and extremely active during the interwar period, the council included dozens of organizations, representing most of the city's major civic groups. LWV

41. *Excerpt From a Study of Health Activities in St. Louis*, enclosure in a letter to the members of the Community Council from Mrs. John Haskell, chairman of the Health Department of the Community Council, May 29, 1928, LWV Papers; "Negro Health Problems," WHMC/UMSL.

42. Colored Committee of the League of Women Voters to the Executive Committee of the League of Women Voters of St. Louis, Feb. 20, 1928, LWV Papers, WHMC/UMSL.

43. The Community Council was originally established as the Central Council of Social Agencies in 1911. See SL 434, box 1, f. 1, WHMC/UMSL.

member Fannie Cook and Urban League Executive Secretary John T. Clark sat on the community council's race relations committee, which was of vital importance to the interests of the African American community because public officials, including the mayor, often looked to the community council for recommendations. Opinion was so divided on the issue of the hospital location that the council could only present all sides the argument without making a recommendation.

Fannie Cook's "Black Liberty," again, offers important insight into divergent racial thinking on the issue among allies. Of Mrs. Adams, the African American clubwoman supporting the separate Negro hospital location, Cook wrote:

We couldn't understand what motivated her position, nor why she had so much support. Every practical reason loomed against her. . . . Mrs. Adams said, "If you want to treat us as well as you treat yourselves, take us . . . into your hospital. If you don't and we have to have our own segregated hospital, let us go off where we won't have to observe the differences . . . I am against segregation . . . and never lose a chance to say so, but if the white laws of this state order segregation, then those who want it, ought to pay for it. It's your luxury, not ours."<sup>44</sup>

African American social activists correctly predicted that the day would come when the city's government would be forced to recognize the expensive folly of continued segregation. But until that time, they had to create a place for themselves where, as local Urban League Executive Secretary John T. Clark argued, "increased social benefits would accrue to this present handicapped generation of Negroes" and eventually "segregation would be priced out of the market."<sup>45</sup>

At the same time that the African American social welfare community fought for a new hospital it also questioned the quality of black public schools. In 1928, approximately ten years after Emmett J. Scott had praised the newly built Sumner High as "probably the best housed, best equipped, and best administered colored high school in the land," local African American social welfare leaders asked, "Is it not a fact that the high standing of Sumner High

44. Fannie Cook, *Black Liberty*, 4–5, draft marked "Approximately 2200 words," Fannie Cook Papers, MHS.

45. John T. Clark, c. 1950, unpublished memoir, quoted in Priscilla A. Dowden, "Over This Point We Are Determined to Fight: African American Public Education and Health Care in St. Louis, Missouri, 1910–1949" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University–Bloomington, 1996), 340.

School is more of 'a myth than a reality?'"<sup>46</sup> The black press eloquently expressed the dissatisfaction with deteriorating standards:

With school facilities and opportunities for Negroes so generally debased in the outlying territories, especially to the south, St. Louis schools have for many years seemed high pantheons in a province of ignorance. For years St. Louisans felt justified in voicing the superiority of their schools and rightly so.

But changes have come. The war years flooded St. Louis with Negroes from the cheating South, and put a burden on the local schools which they yet totter under.

Correlatively, a new group consciousness came in with the migrants which not only has spurred Negro business, but has fostered a feeling of concern in its schools. The slick contentment over its superior schools has been replaced by a desire for still better; where satisfaction once rankled, introspection and inspection have sprung. "Are our St. Louis schools what they are cracked up to be?" is the new group query.<sup>47</sup>

The league's education and colored committees had already joined forces in 1925 to investigate Sumner. Realizing that a school could be no better than its teaching staff, and understanding a teacher's dependency upon the training she received, the league turned away from its original plan of pointing out specific shortcomings in individual schools to a plan of studying what appeared to be the core of the problem—the training school for colored teachers. Sumner housed a kindergarten, a high school (with 1,450 pupils), and a normal school in one building. In the spring term of 1925, 75 students were engaged in normal work. Many students were turned away because third and fourth year work was not offered.<sup>48</sup>

The league's survey of Sumner High School revealed that of thirty-nine teachers listed as "Sumner Teachers College Faculty" in the spring of 1925, only four were engaged in full-time teaching, while five divided their time between normal and high school teaching. Included under faculty were the principals of John Marshall and Cottage Grove schools, the principal of Sumner (also listed as principal of the normal school), the assistant principal of Sumner High, and twenty-four high school teachers. The league offered two

46. National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nomination Form, WHMC/UMSL; William O. McMahon, Chairman of the Citizens Committee, *The St. Louis American*, June 16, 1928.

47. *St. Louis American*, May 5, 1928.

48. Public School Committee, LWVSL, June 18, 1925.

recommendations to the board of education: first, a clarification of statements pertaining to the normal work, so that neither the individuals responsible for the courses nor those about to take them would be confused as to the value of the work offered; and second, the establishment of separate housing, work, faculty, and supervision for the normal work for colored teachers with the ultimate purpose of improving conditions in all the city's schools for colored children. The league's work in this area eventually led to the removal of Summer High School's normal department and the establishment of Stowe Teachers' College.<sup>49</sup>

Another issue, which became known as the Franklin School situation, also underscored the inequality of educational opportunities open to the African American community and typified the public battles fought within its segregated arena. It began with the overcrowded conditions within two areas of the black public schools. First, at the elementary level, where three of the schools for black children ran double shifts, each student could attend school only half the day. Second, there was a lack of vocational training opportunities. In contrast to the new and spacious Hadley Vocational School for white children stood the Carr Lane School for black children, so inadequate in size and equipment that male vocational training students were sent across the city to use the Vashon School shops. In 1931, the board of education voted to take the vocational school out of the Carr Lane School and reopen the Franklin School (formerly for white children) as a vocational school for black children. Franklin School had closed because of white flight. As African Americans moved into the lower-class midtown neighborhood surrounding it, the board could no longer justify or afford to maintain the school for the few remaining white students.<sup>50</sup>

The proposed conversion of the Franklin School into a vocational school for African Americans was in accordance with the wishes of the general education committee, which claimed to represent thousands of African Americans in fifteen organizations. But the board's action met stiff opposition from the Franklin District Neighborhood Association, which represented white business and property owners in the school's vicinity. At an open meeting to discuss the fate of the school, the association's attorney, Edward A. Ferrenbach, argued that a Negro school would depreciate nearby property values

49. Ibid.

50. "The Franklin School Situation," a report by the LWVSL, LWV Papers, WHMC/UMSL.

by 40 to 50 percent. Surprised by the outpouring of protests from white real estate interests, the board of education voted to rescind its action and to hold a public hearing.<sup>51</sup>

Although the board superintendent's position on the Franklin School conversion had been in concert with the organized voice of the African American civic community throughout the struggle, he viewed black activism on the question as a hindrance to a successful resolution. In a letter to Mrs. Schuyler Smith, LWVSL president (whose organization was backing the Franklin School project), Superintendent Gerling summarized his thoughts: "The matter is a complicated one and deserves careful, scientific study, freed from the influence of differences of opinion among the colored people themselves. . . . Unfortunately Negro vocational education in St. Louis has been so placed before the Negro citizens by certain Negro advocates as to give their plans the color of political influence. This fact I regret very much."<sup>52</sup>

The Franklin School situation, like the Negro hospital location issue, became an issue for the St. Louis Community Council to navigate. The LWV and the Urban League formed an unofficial alliance through their joint representation on the council's race relations committee. The seeds of this alliance had been planted in the years leading up to the Franklin School controversy; the colored committee had managed to get its program onto the yearly agendas of both the Urban League and the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA. The Urban League conducted a demographic study that showed an increase in the African American population (to 57 percent) within a half-mile radius of the school; African Americans made up 53 percent of the children enrolled in school. Not surprising, this survey also determined that school facilities for African American children were inadequate. A logical solution to this problem in a segregated society would have been to erect a new building for black children; however, the school board had a no-building mandate in the early 1930s. The increasing numbers of African Americans in traditionally white neighborhoods and the inability of most whites to view black residents as their neighbors, along with the board's obligation to consider cost and social efficiency, exposed the inherent racial discrimination in the doctrine of segregation. In 1932, league member Fannie Cook, also the head of the community council's race relations committee, accurately described the

51. The school board also received a protest against the Negro school from the Real Estate Exchange and an endorsement from the Public School Patrons' Alliance. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, June 13, 1934.

52. Henry J. Gerling to Mrs. Schuyler Smith, May 1934, LWV Papers, WHMC/UMSL.



situation: "There seems to be an impasse unless some organizations bring enough pressure."<sup>53</sup>

The Urban League stepped in to take up the challenge, mobilizing the organizational support of the African American community and collecting petitions in favor of the vocational school from African American churches, labor unions, fraternal orders, and veterans' organizations. The Urban League conducted a survey of businesses in the Franklin neighborhood—ostensibly represented by the hostile Franklin Neighborhood Association—to determine their position on the issue. The survey showed that many white business owners had actually moved into the area to reach Negro customers and that the majority of businesses either favored the conversion of Franklin Elementary to a vocational school or would take no position. Neighborhood association leadership relied on traditional racial rhetoric to make its arguments against the school conversion. While the association's president, A. J. Wolf, presented names of merchants who supposedly opposed the Negro influx into the neighborhood of the Franklin School District, Urban League leadership presented an actual list of signatures of merchants who either favored the increasing black population or were neutral on the question.<sup>54</sup> These findings undercut much of the persuasive power of the neighborhood association's rhetoric.

The Urban League and the League of Women Voters were equally as skillful in using the research and fact-finding functions of the organizations to advance their arguments and agendas. The LWV's tradition of simply "presenting the facts" in an effort to be unbiased and the lower visibility of racial work within the league's program in comparison to the Urban League's overtly racial purpose, worked in the African American community's favor." In 1931, at the outset of the Franklin School controversy, John Clark wrote to A. J. Wolf: "Our group is unorganized and even if organized, have no influence which could get results."<sup>55</sup>

In addition to its influence on the community council, the LWVSL used its radio programming to explain the Franklin School issue. In a seven-page

53. Minutes of the Colored Committee, Sept. 24, 1929; LWVSL, "Minutes of the Committee on Education, 1932," WHMC/UMSL. Also see Mrs. Fannie Cook, chairman of the Community Council of St. Louis Race Relations Department, to Dr. Clara Auer, Feb. 29, 1932, LWV Papers, WHMC/UMSL.

54. See the Urban League Surveys of Franklin School, Franklin School Situation, 1931–1934, Clark files, box 4, Urban League Records, SC/WU; "Data for Executive Board, Community Council," Fannie Cook Papers, box 4, folder 3, MHS.

55. John T. Clark to J. A. Wolf, Dec. 28, 1931, Urban League Papers, SC/WU.

statement, Fannie Cook explained that “the League of Women Voters of St. Louis is endorsing neither side to the controversy, but is presenting the facts in the case because those facts seem important to citizens who care about the welfare of public education in St. Louis.” Cook added that league members would study the issue from the combined standpoint of two considerations: (1) equalization of educational opportunities; and (2) wise expenditure of the taxpayers’ money.<sup>56</sup>

It was not unusual for the LWVSL to take positions on major issues of civic interest, but it did so only after careful and strategic study and planning. The league’s executive committee made its official position known to the board of education in 1932, when it went on record in support of the Franklin School conversion. The league arrived at this position after taking into consideration the increasing black population in the Franklin School district and the unlikelihood that whites would return, the increasing demands for vocational training, the problems caused by having two schools with two principals under the same roof, and the demoralizing effect of double sessions upon children, many of whom were on the street for several hours of the day since their mothers worked.

The efforts of African American social welfare organizers overcame the neighborhood association’s rhetoric. In 1934, the former Franklin Elementary reopened as the Booker T. Washington Vocational Training School for Negroes.<sup>57</sup> This victory, consistent with the nature of African American social struggle, constituted a mere step toward equality of educational opportunities between blacks and whites. Bertha B. Howell, of the Urban League’s Department of Research, clearly defined the problem in her report to the department’s director.

I suppose you know that we won our fight to get the Franklin School for Negroes. This is now in operation and is called the Booker T. Washington Vocational School. We still have, however, the problem of curriculum which I think is quite serious. The Board of Education has adopted a policy of training Negroes for only those jobs which will be open to them in St. Louis. This means that they are not producing skilled mechanics, simply because the Labor Union excludes skilled mechanics. . . . In other words, the A. F. of L. is dictating the curriculum of the Booker T. Washington Vocational School.

56. Fannie F. Cook, “The Franklin School Situation,” undated, Fannie Cook Papers, MHS. Also see the same in LWV Papers, F. Negro Educational Problems, WHMC/UMSL.

57. See “Superintendent’s Report, St. Louis Board of Education, 1934.” A copy can be found at Harris-Stowe State College, St. Louis, Missouri.

I wonder whether this situation ought not to be made a little clearer in your report.<sup>58</sup>

The LWVSL demonstrated a consistent interest and involvement in critical African American social welfare issues throughout the interwar period. Not all of these struggles received wide public attention. The league exposed racial and gender discrimination in areas few other organizations thought of or chose to tackle. While the Urban League and other African American organizations gave staunch support to the black hospital movement in St. Louis (driven by the needs of black physicians for increased professional opportunities), the LWVSL also investigated neighborhood health centers, a "little known branch of . . . [the city's] public health department."<sup>59</sup>

By early 1940s, lower income families were increasingly turning to neighborhood health centers for their routine health-care needs. When the league surveyor visited the center with the largest caseload and heaviest clinic service, she found "negro women in varying stages of pregnancy. . . all of these women must climb to second floor up to narrow crooked stairway on which it would be easy to make a serious stumble or fall. Once undressed and awaiting their turn they stand in the halls or sit on the stairs." The league's on-site surveys exposed conditions that were often worse, by comparison, than the conditions of the municipal hospitals, particularly given the centers' heavier use. Most health centers were found to have inadequate fire protection and insufficient exits, leaky roofs, and inadequate supplies. Neighborhood health centers tended to be understaffed, unable to hire their full quota of nurses because they could not offer the salaries paid in other health institutions. African American field nurses could visit only black homes while white nurses could visit all homes. Neighborhood health center nurses, black and white, already overworked, often had to handle clerical work as well. The LWVSL resolved to publicize the plight of these municipal nurses, who were "carrying on a heroic and little appreciated work under great handicaps," through a series of newspaper articles.<sup>60</sup>

58. Bertha B. Howell, Assistant Director to Ira De A. Reid, Director, Department of Research, National Urban League, Oct. 11, 1934. Correspondence along with copy of report, "A Study of the Industrial Status of Negroes in St. Louis, 1934," Series 8-13, box no. 9, Urban League Papers, SC/WU. Also see, Sept. 12 and Oct. 10, 1933—Petitions from the Young Colored Men's Vocational Pathfinder Club, protesting against subjects taught in the Colored Vocational School, recorded in the Board of Education of the City of St. Louis, Official Report, 1933, Harris Stowe State College.

59. Health Services in St. Louis/Department of Public Welfare, LWV Papers, WHMC/UMSL.

60. Ibid.

Ironically, African American participation and membership in the league underwent a steady decline beginning with the postwar era, as the organization struggled to more fully integrate. By the mid-1930s, as African American social welfare organizing became increasingly radical via the complex mix of workers' struggles and artistic movements, colored committee members began to question their "equal privileges" within the league and aggressively sought out membership in its various departments. Where the colored committee had at one time functioned as a study group, it now operated as an executive group for the larger African American membership. In the mid-1940s, the colored committee briefly assumed a new name—the interracial committee—then, in an effort to bring about true racial integration, the committee was dissolved. Ironically, African American members' activities became invisible after the committee disbanded.<sup>61</sup>

An indication of the difficulty in integrating the LWVSL along new lines was revealed when Mrs. Aaron Fisher of St. Louis wrote to the president of the Kansas City league in 1946, outlining efforts by the local chapters to integrate the "colored members into the League" by steering them into "the various spheres of League activity." At that time, the secretary of the social welfare committee was an African American woman, and the league was considering designating a black chairwoman as well. Fisher warned, however, that there "is one danger, I believe, in having a colored person the Chairman, and that is unfortunately that if too many colored people get into any one group, many of the white people gradually drop out."<sup>62</sup>

The league faced several challenges to its viability in the postwar era. One was to capture the interest of a new generation of women, black and white, whose perceptions of self and society were becoming increasingly distinct from those of the previous generation. For African American women, in particular, the fundamentals were changing with the development of the modern civil rights movement, and as the league struggled to adapt, it would lose the attention of African American women. Increasingly, a new generation would share the perspective of former league member and NAACP leader Margaret Bush Wilson—"The League of Women Voters was my mother's organization." Wilson's mother, her namesake, had been a member of the first

61. The Minutes of the Colored/Interracial Committee cease abruptly in 1947. While LWV records reveal continued organizational efforts in the FEPC and civil rights issues, there is no indication of African American women's involvement on the various committees. See LWV Papers, WHMC/UMSL.

62. Mrs. Aaron Fischer to Mrs. Alfred Evans, Nov. 8, 1946. LWV Papers, WHMC/UMSL.

generation of African American leaguers, the generation who, from Wilson's perspective, helped significantly to "bridge this separation between our people and the majority."<sup>63</sup>

For Margaret Bush and her contemporaries, the LWVSL proved vital, in the period between the world wars, for African American women in need of vehicles in which to expand their political and civic involvement. The league's voter service activities proved immensely important to an African American urban community armed with the franchise and heavily courted during the 1920s and '30s by ward and city politicians. The league's investigative research, namely its studies and surveys, of taxpayer-supported public institutions often proved invaluable to a black community forced to make do in separate hospitals and schools.

An active clubwoman and NAACP activist, Margaret Bush encouraged her daughter, through her example, to join the league, and Wilson enrolled after she finished Lincoln University Law School in 1943. She remembers her involvement being limited to mobilizing around specific issues—voter activities and city charter changes—and doesn't recall participating in formal meetings or study groups.<sup>64</sup> In 1954, the same year that the Supreme Court ruled segregated schools illegal in *Brown v. Board of Education*, Margaret Bush Wilson became active in the local chapter of the NAACP. "I had every opportunity early on in my career to become a stellar person in the League of Women Voters, the Red Cross, or the United Way," Wilson maintains. She remembers thinking, "If I have good organizational skills, good conceptual skills, good critical thinking, good personal/interpersonal relations, those qualities ought to be used in support of an organization [for] 'our people,' not the majority community."<sup>65</sup> For Wilson, that organization was the NAACP.

Much work remains to be done on the League of Women Voters' racial work at the local level. Shannon L. Frystak, looking at racial integration of the New Orleans league from 1953 to 1963, observes that prior to integration, local league chapters were expected to abide by national league bylaws, which called for a membership that would not only be representative of the community but that would be community-wide in setting up programs.<sup>66</sup> The extent to which local leagues interpreted this charge (prior to and after the

63. Margaret Bush Wilson to the author, Mar., 2001; Margaret Bush Wilson to author, Apr. 29, 2004.

64. Ibid.

65. Margaret Bush Wilson, interviewed by Doris Wesley, WHMC/UMSL.

66. Shannon L. Frystak, "With All Deliberate Speed": The Integration of the League of Women Voters of New Orleans, 1953–1963," in Thomas H. Appleton Jr. and Angela

*Brown* decision) to exclude or include African American women is debatable. The LWVSL “integrated” early during the affiliate’s inception, recruiting African American women and establishing a “colored committee” with representation on the executive committee. That the New Orleans league did not integrate until decades later suggests possible regional differences between southern league chapters and those of border cities like St. Louis, where patterns of segregation and race relations had developed more unevenly and African American voters had not been disenfranchised. While institutional racial segregation continued to thrive throughout most of the twentieth century in St. Louis’s public schools and hospitals, African American health and social welfare concerns were hammered out by interracial committees, a feature not found in the racial patterns of the Deep South. What little historians know about the LWV and racial integration suggests wide variation. Only through more local and regional studies will a full picture of African American struggles for full citizenship and racial equality emerge.

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Boswell, ed. *Searching for Their Places: Women in the South across Four Centuries* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 261.

## Louise Thompson Patterson and the Southern Roots of the Popular Front

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*Claire Nee Nelson*

An educator, political activist, cultural critic, and social worker, Louise Thompson Patterson has been most often remembered for her role as an interlocutor between the literati of the Harlem Renaissance and the political activists of the Popular Front. Scholars have described her as everything from Wallace Thurman's wife and Langston Hughes's secretary, to "a graceful hostess [who exposed] black artists, writers, and theatrical people to leftist causes in a relaxed and low pressure setting," to "a professional fellow traveler [who rose] to party authority."<sup>1</sup> Regardless of the particular inclination of the observer, Patterson has figured into historical accounts most often in connection with the Harlem Renaissance and the Popular Front, and, indeed,

For comments, insightful criticisms, and encouragement, the author wishes to thank Glenda Gilmore, Bethany Johnson, Adriane Smith, Katherine Mellon Charron, Francoise Hamlin, and the participants of the 2003 Southern Conference on Women's History. The work has benefited immeasurably from the careful attention paid to it by editors Judith McArthur and Angela Boswell. Archival research in the Louise Thompson Patterson Papers at the Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University, was made possible, in part, by a Woodruff Library Fellowship in African-American studies. And finally, an enormous debt of gratitude and love is owed to Joshua Nelson for his unceasing support and unfailing cheerleading.

1. David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York: Penguin, 1997); Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem during the Depression* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 43; William J. Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left: African-American Writing and Communism between the Wars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 143.

it is true that she sought throughout her lifetime to bridge the gulf between black artists and writers and socialist and Communist politics.<sup>2</sup>

But because of the New York-centered bias of much of the scholarship on the two movements with which she was so notably connected, Patterson herself has come to be regarded as a native daughter of New York City movements—first, a supporting cast member to the leading lights of Harlem, and then, in the 1930s, an internationalist whose politics were nevertheless born out of the city's leftist circles. What these accounts obscure are the true origins of her class-based vision of racial equality: a perspective Patterson in fact developed in her early years observing firsthand the economic oppression of African Americans in the South. Her embrace of Marxist and Leninist solutions to racial discrimination and systemic inequality was not inspired by New York salon discussions. Rather, it was rooted in the observations she made as a teacher at the land-grant college in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, of the interconnections between lynchings, the sham of industrial education, and the destitution of black farmers in the surrounding countryside. And it was further reinforced by her experiences as an instructor at Hampton Institute that made plain the failure of “uplift” as a path African Americans could walk toward racial equality. Patterson brought these insights with her when she moved North, where she found institutional support for her radical beliefs within the Communist Party of the United States and affiliated organizations, all headquartered in New York. But ultimately it was the South and her experiences there that would remain both the source of her leftist politics and the touchstone to which she would return throughout her life for evidence of progress in her struggle for African American equality.

Born Louise Alone Toles Thompson in Chicago, Illinois, on September 9, 1901, Patterson spent her childhood moving with her mother, a domestic worker, and stepfather, who worked as a chef, through a succession of predominantly white towns in the Pacific Northwest. As a light-skinned African American on the “frontier,” and frequently the only African American child in otherwise all-white towns and schools, Patterson was forced, early on, to

2. Mention of Patterson's work in connection with Harlem Renaissance can be found in biographies of prominent artists and intellectuals of the era including Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson and W. E. B. Du Bois, as well as in the extensive general scholarship on the period. Works on the Popular Front in which Patterson figures, include Naison, *Communists in Harlem during the Depression* and Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left*, as well as Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), and his *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002).



confront the vagaries and inconsistencies of the complex racial hierarchies that characterized race relations in the rural far West in the early part of the twentieth century. Although occasionally humiliating, and always isolating, these hierarchies were also very much contingent upon the specific participants and the context in which interracial relations were being acted out. Patterson's memoirs, which she began with Margaret Wilkerson as a collaborator but never finished, recount an incident that epitomized her experience with race in the far West:

My most vivid memory of Goldfield [Nevada] is my first conscious encounter with racism. It was here that I entered first grade, the only black in the class. . . . [One] day the teacher sat with a pile of white envelopes on her desk and started calling the students to come forward one by one. . . . She called them alphabetically, and I waited, with great anticipation for her to get to the "T's. . . ." She finally reached them, but passed on to the remainder of the alphabet without calling out my name. . . . Confused, I felt both invisible and singled out.

Patterson went on to explain her exclusion saying, "Later I found out that I had not received one of the white envelopes because they contained invitations to a birthday party of one of the children in the class, and I was not invited."<sup>3</sup>

In her memoirs, she juxtaposes these stories of discrimination with other accounts that suggest her awareness of the instability that characterized racial hierarchies in the rural far West. Analyzing her own reactions to her classmates' racial prejudices, Patterson wrote:

How ironic, then, that I would later join these same children following a Chinese man down the street, chanting: "Chink Chink Chinaman. Stole a load of wood. Chink Chink Chinaman. Ain't no good." And I remember keeping silent when these children made a dark-skinned black boy whom they called "Rastus" dance on a box and do monkeyshines. "Nigger, nigger, never die. Black face and shiny eye." Not knowing when they might tire of teasing children darker than I and turn their hatred on me, I either kept silent or joined them in taunting those more despised than me.<sup>4</sup>

3. "The Life and Times of Louise Thompson Patterson," Louise Thompson Patterson Papers, box 19, folder 16, 12–13. Special Collections and Archives Division, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University.

4. *Ibid.*

To further add to the instability, Louise Thompson Patterson and her mother were light-skinned enough to be able to “pass” as Mexican, and sometimes as white, in order to secure employment in communities where the hiring of blacks was considered taboo. “Towns, even cities, in Oregon and California had few Negroes in those early years of the twentieth century,” Nathan Huggins explains. “Afro-Americans there found jobs more available the more they were able to change, to become something else, to take on the coloration and ethnic identity that each white community found tolerable. Louise and her mother were sometimes white, sometimes Mexican, and sometimes it did not matter.”<sup>5</sup> The complexity and inconstancy of hierarchies in the multiracial far West of Patterson’s childhood meant that the levels of racism and outright abuse that she confronted at any given time depended in large part upon the specific circumstances and participants. Accordingly, while her experiences with discrimination were frequently isolating and hurtful, there was little in the racism of Ogden, Utah; of Boise, Idaho; Walla Walla, Washington, or of Pendleton, The Dalles, and Bend, Oregon, to inspire the functionalist view of the interrelationship of race and class to which Patterson would soon come to ascribe. For that, she would have to go south.<sup>6</sup>

Her family finally settled in Oakland, California, in 1919, and after graduating from Oakland High School that year, Patterson began attending the University of California at Berkeley. While there, she heard a lecture given by W. E. B. Du Bois on black history that stirred in her such feelings of self-respect that she left the room “for the first time in my life, proud to be black.” She realized that she “did not know the literature, the history of my people. Du Bois aroused in me the desire to know. Because of him I began to realize that there was something to know about blacks. Not only the faults that you

5. Nathan Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971) 23. Huggins uses this story to explain Patterson’s desire to join the black artists of the Harlem Renaissance then struggling to redefine the meaning of race and black identity, although it seems equally indicative of the complexity of racial hierarchies and the vagaries of racial boundaries in the far West.

6. Linda Gordon, *The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), Sarah Deutsch, *No Separate Refuge: Culture, Class, and Gender on an Anglo-Hispanic Frontier in the American Southwest, 1880–1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), and Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) exemplify the efforts of historians to document and explicate the instability in the American West of racial, gender, and class hierarchies that could assume more rigid contours elsewhere in the nation.

saw in the culture; there was far more to know about it. And I was determined to know.”<sup>7</sup>

After graduating in 1923 with a bachelor of science degree in commerce, Patterson left California for the University of Chicago, where she briefly pursued a graduate degree in education. She was not happy there, however, in part because, newly awakened to the study of black history and literature, she felt intellectually stifled by what she perceived to be the limited engagement with social issues evinced by the black middle class in Chicago. Her new friends there were interested only in “elaborate parties and making successful marriages,” so when, in 1925, a friend mentioned to her that he knew of an opening at the Agricultural, Mechanical and Normal College in Arkansas for an instructor to teach courses in business and economics, Patterson jumped at the chance.<sup>8</sup> She immediately contacted the school’s principal, was offered the job, and was on her way less than two weeks later to Pine Bluff, Arkansas.

“Arkansas was to become a postgraduate course for me in racism,” Patterson said later of her experiences there, for it was indeed the first time she had ever encountered such a pervasive and unmitigated system of racial oppression.<sup>9</sup> A land-grant institution, the Agricultural, Mechanical and Normal College had been founded in 1873 as a branch of the Arkansas Industrial University (later the University of Arkansas) and had been intended only for the professional training of black teachers, since at the time, African American undergraduates were being admitted to the state university. After Reconstruction, however, the college was increasingly assigned the task of separately educating the state’s black students. By the time the Morrill Act of 1890 was passed, signaling the federal government’s sanction, if not wholehearted embrace, of “separate but equal” education, “[i]t was simply understood that [the school had been] established for the colored population of the State.”<sup>10</sup>

7. The first quote is from David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919–1963* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000), 103. The second is from “The Life and Times of Louise Thompson Patterson,” box 19, folder 19, 5. See also Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, 23; and Bruce Kellner, ed., “Thompson [Patterson], Louise,” *The Harlem Renaissance: A Historical Dictionary for the Era* (Westport: Greenwood, 1984), 353.

8. “The Life and Times of Louise Thompson Patterson,” box 19, folder 19, 6.

9. “The Life and Times of Louise Thompson Patterson,” box 19, folder 12, 8.

10. Lawrence Arnette Davis, “A Comparison of the Philosophies, Purposes and functions of the Negro Land-Grant Colleges and Universities with Emphasis Upon the Program of the Agricultural, Mechanical, and Normal College, Pine Bluff, Arkansas” (Ph.D.

The consequences of this change in educational philosophy could be easily discerned: by 1883, classes in geometry, calculus, logic, and Latin had been dropped from the school's curriculum. In 1891, the campus's third building was constructed: it housed a wood shop, a machine shop, a foundry, and a forge. And in 1902, when the school undertook a massive administrative expansion, the departments added included agriculture, dairy work, shoe-making, harness making, brick making, printing, a wheelwright department, and a laundry.<sup>11</sup>

The state's increasing economic neglect of the institution and its students was tangible as well. Upon her initial arrival in 1925, Patterson mistook the college's front gate for a wooden gate that would normally lead into a cow pasture. Mice infested every inch of the women's dormitory and made homes for themselves in the clothing Patterson hung in her closet. The campus's only brick structure was a faded, crumbling relic of the Civil War. Recruited to the school to head the department of commerce, Patterson found herself also assigned to teach Spanish classes—not, as she soon learned, an unusual practice: the new English teacher that year had been appointed to teach the AM&N students French, despite having had only one year of the language herself at Ohio State University. Patterson recalled, “We used to listen outside Miss Wallace's class sometimes where we could overhear her saying ‘Ow, ow, monsir,’ for ‘Oui, oui, monsieur.’”<sup>12</sup>

All these, however, were merely the surface indications of a system where the “separate but equal” education of African Americans was a sham calculated to do little more than perpetuate black poverty. Registration in Patterson's classes in Pine Bluff did not stabilize until November, since only after the cotton was picked and baled were the sons and daughters of sharecroppers and tenant farmers permitted to attend school. And even then, these students could stay only until planting season began. Describing the impact of being permitted to attend school only four to five months a year and college entrance requirements that mandated only completion of the fifth grade in the state's segregated public schools, Patterson said of the students that “bookkeeping machines puzzled them because even simple arithmetic was beyond their comprehension. Writing a simple composition was a challenge

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diss., University of Arkansas, 1960), esp. p. 303. See also Lurline Mahan Lee, “The Origin, and Present Status of Arkansas' Program of Higher Education for Negroes” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1955). For the language in the Morrill Act of 1890 sanctioning segregation, see *Land-Grant Colleges and Universities Bulletin*, 18 (1951), 12–14.

11. Davis, “A Comparison of the Philosophies,” 311.

12. “The Life and Times of Louise Thompson Patterson,” box 19, folder 19, 12.

because they knew no grammar. Teaching Spanish was a farce for students who had no ear for sound nor vocabulary in English to match the Spanish equivalents.” And yet, the Commercial Department, in which Patterson taught, was touted to campus visitors as the model for African American industrial education.

When visitors came to the campus, my students and I knew they would always be brought to our classroom. And we had an understanding. My students were to go about their work without interruption. No matter what mistakes they might make at the typewriter or bookkeeping machine, they were to keep on going. One day, I looked out the window and saw our principal. . . . leading an important looking white delegation towards our room. I looked around to see how “business-like” the students looked and saw one of our girls with her coat on. As I have said, we had only a small coal-oil heater and in bad weather our room was cold, so I allowed the students, if they wished, to wear their coats. On this day, it so happened only one girl, Valentine, was wearing her coat, and I ran over to her quickly and asked her to remove it. “Miss Thomas,” she said, “I can’t.” I demanded that she do it, and as the guests entered the door, she quickly snatched it off. To my amazement, there she sat in a very, very short-sleeved summer dress with long-sleeved, white underwear the length of her arms. There she was, this little black girl, sitting there in her white underwear! And she kept right on typing as I had instructed everyone to do.<sup>13</sup>

At this point, Patterson later recalled, “the absurdity of the entire situation suddenly hit me; the incongruity of an educational institution capitalizing on the image, but rarely delivering the reality of education, despite the students eagerness to learn. . . . I was convulsed.”<sup>14</sup> Patterson was discovering the reality of industrial education in the South.

Patterson was still teaching at the school eighteen months later when, in February 1927, the Mississippi River broke its levees and flooded more than 100,000 acres of Arkansas Delta farmland.<sup>15</sup> Dry, but surrounded on all sides by the muddy waters of the swollen river, Pine Bluff became an island

13. Davis, “A Comparison of the Philosophies,” 308; and “The Life and Times of Louise Thompson Patterson,” box 19, folder 19, 14, and 15. Patterson also recounted in her memoirs that because they lacked the “ear for sound,” as she described it, her students could not be taught the correct pronunciation of her last name (Thompson). Accordingly, they called her Miss Thomas for the duration of her tenure at the school.

14. “The Life and Times of Louise Thompson Patterson,” box 19, folder 19, 15.

15. Secondary sources that treat the Mississippi River Flood of 1927 include Pete Daniel, *Deep’n as it Come: The 1927 Mississippi River Flood* (New York: Oxford University

and a destination for black refugees displaced by the disaster. Until this point, Patterson's familiarity with the inner workings of the tenant farmer system and, indeed, with sharecroppers themselves, had largely been confined "to what I could see during our [car] rides about the countryside. . . . The shotgun shacks with cotton growing up to the door, the outhouse, the black kettle in the yard, the half-clothed, barefoot children running about, and the endless cotton fields."<sup>16</sup> But as wagon after wagon, each one overflowing with laborers from the surrounding plantations, began to roll on to the college campus even before the floodwaters had reached their peak, Patterson came face to face with what Herbert Hoover, then the secretary of commerce and chair of the Mississippi River Flood Committee, would call "the economic system which exists in the South," and for which, he claimed, national agencies had no responsibility. White drivers would announce the arrival of their wagons as "Niggers from Mr. So-and-So's plantation," Patterson recalled, and once deposited at the college, the refugees were forcibly prohibited from leaving except when ordered to labor shoring up the levees.<sup>17</sup> The aid they were given by the Red Cross was conditioned on their working "like a dog under a gun and club and tagged like a bale of cotton," and even this assistance was usually the dregs that white refugees had already been offered and had discarded. When the floodwaters finally receded in July, Patterson remembered, "the sharecroppers were assembled under trees by plantation; white overseers shouted for 'Mr. So-and-So's niggers' who then piled into crowded wagons for their return to peonage."<sup>18</sup>

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Press, 1977); John M. Barry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997); and Robyn Spencer, "Contested Terrain: The Mississippi Flood of 1927 and the Struggle to Control Black Labor," *Journal of Negro History* 79:2 (Spring 1994): 170–81.

16. "The Life and Times of Louise Thompson Patterson," box 19, folder 19, 22–23.

17. Pete Daniel, *The Shadow of Slavery: Peonage in the South, 1901–1969* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1972): 150; "The Life and Times of Louise Thompson Patterson," box 19, folder 19, 21–22; and Spencer, "Contested Terrain," 170–181. For information on the NAACP's investigation into the racially discriminatory allotment of aid to the victims of the flood, and into the violence perpetuated against black flood refugees, see Mary White Ovington, *The Walls Came Tumbling Down* (New York: Arno, 1969) 245–49; Sondra Kathryn Wilson, ed. *In Search of Democracy: the NAACP Writings of James Weldon Johnson, Walter White, and Roy Wilkins, 1920–1977* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); the James Weldon Johnson Papers, The James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection of Negro Arts and Letters, Beinecke Library, Yale University, New Haven; and the Papers of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

18. *Chicago Defender*, June 16, 1927, qtd. in Spencer, "Contested Terrain," 175; "Testimony by Louise Thompson Patterson on behalf of the International Workers Order, ca.

On May 4 of the same year, Patterson was initiated into one more “folk-way” of the southern system of race relations. That day, John Carter, a thirty-eight-year-old black man from Little Rock, just ninety miles from Pine Bluff, was apprehended as he walked down a street, charged with attacking a white woman and her daughter, and lynched by a mob of over two hundred men. The mob then dragged his body to the center of Little Rock’s black community and burned it at the stake, the fire fueled by the wooden pews that the mob ripped from the nearby Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church. Hours of rioting and looting through the black business district ensued, and in terror, many of the city’s most prominent black citizens fled to Pine Bluff, where they recounted their horror at the incident. For Patterson, it was a “devastating experience. It was as if I could smell burning flesh. . . . I went about in a daze with a hatred of anything white, [and a] fearful hush-hush pervaded our community.”<sup>19</sup>

The juxtaposition of these two events—her encounter with the refugee sharecroppers and the lynching of John Carter with the subsequent violence against black businesses—while she struggled daily with the deficiencies of the “separate-but-equal” educational system in Arkansas, encouraged Patterson to draw intellectual and visual connections between the economic oppression and racial inequality she had witnessed. She was not yet ready to embrace anticapitalist agendas for combating racial discrimination, however, because still available to her were more conservative ideological alternatives to socialism that similarly linked arguments about economic inequality with plans for racial progress. Booker T. Washington’s philosophy of racial uplift through economic advancement, for example, held out a vision of racial harmony at the end of a long road of black free-market labor and capitalist achievement.<sup>20</sup> And so in the summer of 1927, Patterson left Pine Bluff for an appointment to teach business administration at Hampton Institute in

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1950–1951.” Louise Thompson Patterson Papers, box 8, folder 10, 7–8; and “The Life and Times of Louise Thompson Patterson,” box 19, folder 19, 22.

19. “The Life and Times of Louise Thompson Patterson,” box 19, folder 19, 23. See also Stephanie Harp, “Stories of a Lynching: Reporting on a Mob and Its Victim, 1927,” unpublished paper; and Brian Greer, “A Reign of Terror,” *Arkansas Times*, Aug. 4, 2000, for accounts of Carter’s lynching and the subsequent riot.

20. For more on Booker T. Washington, “Atlanta Compromise,” and uplift ideology in general, see C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877–1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971); David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868–1919* (New York: Henry Holt, 1993); and Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

Virginia—one of the nation's most prestigious black colleges and the very birthplace of racial uplift ideology in the New South.

If uplift involved “an emphasis on self-help, racial solidarity, temperance, thrift, chastity, social purity, patriarchal authority, and the accumulation of wealth . . . opposed blacks’ involvement in politics, situated the black labor force at the bottom of the southern economy and acquiesced in the separation of the races,” then Hampton Institute was uplift’s institutional embodiment.<sup>21</sup> Founded in 1868 by American missionary Samuel Chapman Armstrong so that “Negroes and Indians could learn the lessons of humility, cleanliness, thrift, and above all, the love of the white race,” Hampton Institute and its model for black education were beloved by northern and southern white philanthropists alike. In 1925, just two years before Patterson’s arrival, the school boasted an endowment of over \$8.5 million, outpacing the endowments of even the University of Virginia and William and Mary College.<sup>22</sup>

In return for white patronage, however, the school had become a showcase for white paternalism and racism cloaked in missionary benevolence and Victorian morality. Students, Patterson recalled, were expected to perform housekeeping services for members of the faculty and staff, as well as janitorial and maintenance tasks for the school, in return for which they were paid eight dollars a month. The school had instituted a seemingly unending series of degrading and demeaning policies governing the personal conduct of its students, including regulations that prohibited ballroom dancing, since dancing necessitated bodily contact between male and female students; rules that forced students to view plays with the lights on in the theater in the belief that, otherwise, they would engage in sexual activities despite the presence of chaperones; and requirements mandating compulsory chapel attendance and enforced “lights out” at a predesignated hour of the night. As Patterson later remembered:

In passing through the dormitory corridor, I often encountered white matrons on their knees peeking through keyholes into the girls’ rooms to try to find

21. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, 2 and 34. Other studies of Hampton include Robert Francis Engs, *Educating the Disfranchised and Disinherited: Samuel Chapman Armstrong and Hampton Institute, 1839–1893* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997); James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); and Raymond Wolters, *The New Negro on Campus: Black College Rebellions of the 1920s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

22. Lewis, W. E. B. Du Bois: *Biography of a Race*, 124; Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, 237; and Lewis, W. E. B. Du Bois: *The Fight for Equality and the American Century*, 133.



out what they were doing during the enforced quiet hour after classes were over. One day I found the Dean of Women on the floor of the dormitory auditorium with a yard-stick measuring the length of the girls' skirts to make sure they were long enough to cover their knees when they crossed their legs in class.<sup>23</sup>

Although efforts to police the sexuality of African American men and women had been a component of white supremacy extending back to slavery, they took on enhanced social importance and were carried out with increased vigor and diligence as the end of Reconstruction and the rise of Jim Crow pronounced black sexuality to be the primary culprit for the political upheaval and dislocation in the South wrought by industrialization and migration. Progressives around the nation, too, adopted these beliefs about the ungovernable passions of black men and women, and manipulated tropes of "civilization's hierarchies" into justifications for continued white supremacy.<sup>24</sup> So it was entirely in accord with uplift ideology that students at Hampton—"some of the best . . . foremost men," Patterson wrote—were referred to as "heathens" by teachers, most of whom were white, and the student chorus was forced to sing slave spirituals for visiting notables. But the intertwining of racism and paternalism, Hampton-style, could take more serious forms as well. Patterson recalled:

All of the office clerks were white, the men who taught in the trade school were white, and the rumor was that some of them were members of the Ku Klux Klan. I remember one day I was coming across the campus, sometime in the spring, I believe. And I heard these weird cries. It was weeping, the kind that makes your heart sink it was so terrible. I looked behind me, and there was a student being dragged across the campus by a white man who was beating him. . . . They snuck that boy off the campus, and no one ever said anything about the why or wherefore of it. . . . That's the kind of people they had in the trade school.<sup>25</sup>

23. "The Life and Times of Louise Thompson Patterson," box 19, folder 19, 34.

24. There is a substantial literature on this subject; some of the best recent examples include Glenda E. Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Stephen Kantrowitz, *Ben Tillman and the Reconstruction of White Supremacy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); and Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

25. [Louise Thompson Patterson], "The Hampton Strike," *Crisis* 34 (Dec. 1927): 345–46; and "The Life and Times of Louise Thompson Patterson," box 19, folder 19, 38 and 49.

In October 1927, just one month after Patterson's arrival on campus, the Hampton student body went on strike to protest the school's repressive paternalism. The Hampton strike was one of a wave of student uprisings sweeping black colleges and universities in the mid-1920s: similar disturbances had rocked the halls of Fisk and Howard universities two years earlier. Although the immediate cause of the strike—the enactment of the lights-on policy in the student theater—and the form that the initial protest took—a refusal to sing “plantation songs” for Gen. Jan Smuts, visiting from South Africa—were attacks on the administration's racist paternalism, the stated grievances of the protesters were modest. The seven hundred students who participated in the boycott of classes asked for better-trained faculty “so that we shall no longer be subjected to instruction from teachers whose education is below that of the average student”; they demanded a respite from enforcement of the dress code on Saturday evenings; and they complained about the poor quality of the food served to them.<sup>26</sup>

The administration responded harshly, expelling five students, suspending twenty-nine, and classifying thirty more as “temporarily ineligible.” But, as W. E. B. Du Bois wrote in an editorial on the strike, what in reality defeated the protest was not the policies of the administration, but the fact that Hampton alumni and the parents of Hampton students refused to support the strikers.

[A]t Hampton there were parents and alumni who turned upon their own children like wild beasts, ready to beat them into submission; insisting that even if the school authorities were wrong, it was the business of black boys and girls to submit. At Hampton, the Alumni actually published to the world a statement; declaring, first, that they gave complete approval and consent to what the Hampton authorities had done, including the wholesale suspensions, and then, finally, promising that they would investigate.<sup>27</sup>

Other black colleges closed their doors to the expelled students, despite the fact that many were “the best of the school.” This was “uplift” and its effect on a prior generation of students “sent to school to learn to obey,” and Patterson

26. “The Life and Times of Louise Thompson Patterson,” box 19, folder 19, 41. For more information on the student strike and its catalyst, see Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: the Fight for Equality and the American Century*, 132–48; and Raymond Wolters, *The New Negro on Campus*. Patterson's memoirs suggest that Smuts was visiting Hampton in search of a model for what would later become Bantu education in South Africa. “The Life and Times of Louise Thompson Patterson,” box 19, folder 19, 38.

27. W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Hampton Strike,” *Crisis* 34 (Dec. 1927): 347–48.

was disillusioned. "I have become keenly aware," she wrote in a letter to Du Bois, "of the state of hypocrisy, racial prejudice, and backwardness into which Hampton has fallen . . . [my] faith has been deeply shaken by this whole affair."<sup>28</sup>

With uplift ideology exposed as an infeasible path to racial equality, Patterson sought an alternative theoretical context for the linkages she had come to see between economic and racial oppression. On the recommendation of her future husband, William L. Patterson, whom she had met on a brief visit to New York between her appointments at Pine Bluff and Hampton, Patterson went to the library at Hampton Institute in search of Marx's *Das Kapital*. "Believe it or not, despite having graduated with honors in economics . . . I had never heard the name Karl Marx or Lenin. . . . So I went to Hampton Library, and, sure enough, they had *Das Kapital*. It was not out there where the students could have access to it, but back in the stacks, in the back room. I took it to my room, and I tried to read it."<sup>29</sup>

It quickly became clear to Patterson why the authorities at Hampton Institute had considered the book dangerous enough to limit its accessibility. In its pages, she found not simply a theory of modern political economy, but an entire vocabulary linking capitalism to slavery and economic oppression, an explanation, she thought, for the persistent oppression of African Americans in the South, and a context and rudimentary blueprint for black resistance to white domination.

*Das Kapital*, published in 1867, elaborated a theoretical description of the economic laws governing modern society and sought to prove that these laws led inevitably to the demise of capitalism and the triumph of the proletariat. At the cornerstone of Marx's treatise lay his evolution of a "labor theory of value," which, in essence, announced that the worth of commodities should be determined not by supply or demand, but by calculating the costs to the laborer of producing these goods. In Marx's formulation, the worker—the humblest being in modern society's great industrial revolution—became the wellspring from which all economic laws and values were derived.<sup>30</sup>

Marx's recentering of the economic universe was intensely appealing to Patterson, in part because her own awakening to the promises of black history, literature, and achievement, initiated by W. E. B. Du Bois's speech at

28. Patterson, "The Hampton Strike," 345 (first and last quotation); and W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Hampton Strike," 348.

29. "The Life and Times of Louise Thompson Patterson," box 19, folder 20, 5.

30. Karl Marx, *Das Kapital: A Critique of Political Economy*, ed. Frederick Engels, condensed by Serge L. Levitsky (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2000).

Berkeley, was still ongoing. But it was largely because she read Marx's writings through the lens of her recent experiences in the South that the socialist economic theory fascinated her from the outset. Patterson had witnessed firsthand in Arkansas the role that black sharecroppers played as the building blocks of southern agriculture; accordingly, she read *Das Kapital* as transforming "Niggers from Mr. So-and-So's plantation" into the only real creators of "value" in American economic life.

Furthermore, Marx's critique of the objectivity of contemporary scholarship seemed to provide an answer to Patterson's question of why it was that all anyone knew about African Americans in the United States were "the faults that you saw in the culture," and why the nation's premier institution for black education could be so obsessively focused on civilizing and uplifting.<sup>31</sup> Because histories were written by the oppressors and not by the oppressed, Marx argued, workers—and here, Patterson inferred, African Americans—were often inserted into the historical record as subjects who benefited from the domination of others: "The historical movement which changes the producers into wage-workers, appears, on the one hand, as their emancipation from serfdom . . . and this side alone exists for our bourgeois historians. But, on the other hand, these new freedmen became sellers of themselves only after they had been robbed of all their own means of production."<sup>32</sup>

But *Das Kapital* did more than simply champion the underdog and explain gaps in the historical record. In his description of the power wielded by capital over labor, Marx employed a vocabulary of bondage, of exploitation, and of enforced dependence that must have resonated deeply both with what Patterson knew of the history of American slavery and with her memories of the sharecropping system she had witnessed in operation in Pine Bluff. "In agriculture as in manufacture," Marx wrote, "the transformation of production under the sway of capital, means . . . the martyrdom of the producer; the . . . enslaving, exploiting, and impoverishing [of] the labourer; . . . [the] organization of labour-processes is turned into an organized mode of crushing out the workman's individual vitality, freedom, and independence."<sup>33</sup> To Patterson, this description of the imperatives of capital might have seemed a more than adequate explanation for how black sharecroppers, fleeing the floodwaters of the Mississippi River almost sixty-five years after Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, could still be publicly identified by

31. "The Life and Times of Louise Thompson Patterson," box 19, folder 19, 5.

32. Marx, *Das Kapital*, 351.

33. *Ibid.*, 254.

the name of the landowner on whose property they worked, “commandeered under guns to work on the levees,” and prohibited from leaving the Agricultural, Mechanical, and Normal College’s grounds, so that “the school actually became a concentration camp.”<sup>34</sup>

Patterson’s memories of her experience trying to educate the children of these sharecroppers within the confines of a school year that had been whittled down to a paltry four to five months by the demands of the sharecropping system in Pine Bluff must have come back to her as she read Marx’s account of the insatiable appetite of capital for the expropriation of labor’s fruits. *Das Kapital* read, in part:

[T]he labourer is nothing else, his whole life through, than labour-power, that therefore all his disposable time is by nature and law labour-time, to be devoted to the self-expansion of capital. Time for education, for intellectual development, for the fulfilling of social functions and for social intercourse, for the free-play of his bodily and mental activity, even the rest time of Sunday. . . . But in its blind unrestrainable passion, its werewolf hunger for surplus-labour, capital oversteps not only the moral, but even the merely physical maximum bounds of the working day. It usurps the time for growth, development, and healthy maintenance of the body.<sup>35</sup>

Patterson’s students at AM&N—young adults who lacked comprehension of grammatical rules and of basic arithmetic and who attended classes in their long underwear for want of resources to buy proper winter clothing, but who, nevertheless, had been confined to an academic calendar determined by the contours of planting and harvesting seasons—must have provided a vivid example of the political economy of capitalism that Marx described. Even the “special education or training” that Marx said capitalists required of labor in order to “modify the human organism, so that it may acquire skill and handiness in a given branch of industry,” Patterson could have inferred to be a portrayal of the segregated system of industrial education in place in the South.<sup>36</sup>

*Das Kapital* appealed to Patterson not only because it painted a picture of labor relations that looked to her uncannily like the scenes she had witnessed in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, and Hampton, Virginia, but also because it went further. Not content with simply explaining that the exploitation of laborers

34. “Testimony by Louise Thompson Patterson on behalf of the International Workers Order,” 8.

35. Marx, *Das Kapital*, 186–87.

36. *Ibid.*, 140.

was inherent in capitalist systems, Marx's classic also provided a theoretical context for what Patterson interpreted as black resistance to white oppression; it even hinted at the forms that that resistance would take. Where Marx argued that capital and labor were ineluctably opposed to one another in a capitalist system, Patterson inferred that their American counterparts—powerful whites and powerless African Americans—were similarly divided. Uplift ideology and submission to Hamptonian paternalism could thus never succeed as a path to racial equality, because whites would never willingly accommodate the exercise of civil rights by blacks. To pretend otherwise, Patterson concluded, contradicted or ignored the most basic economic laws of modern society as Marx had described them.

Rather, Marx wrote, along with the “mass of misery, oppression, slavery, degradation, [and] exploitation,” would grow the “revolt of the working-class . . . [so that this capitalist] integument is burst asunder. . . . The expropriators are expropriated.” The oppressed would inevitably prove victorious over those who subjugated them, and, Marx suggested, they would accomplish this by becoming “disciplined, united, organised by the very mechanism of the process of capitalist production itself.”<sup>37</sup> Organizing, unionizing, and raising the consciousness of workers, Patterson inferred from Marx, were the keys to the triumph of the downtrodden.

Marx's prescriptions were consistent with Patterson's experience: the widespread economic deprivation, racial oppression, and paternalist degradation that she had witnessed in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, and Hampton, Virginia, suggested to her that capitalist models of progress toward racial equality, as practiced in the South, had demonstrated themselves to be woefully inadequate. The rudimentary blueprint Marx offered for the overthrow of white supremacy seemed to Patterson a promising start. And so it was at Hampton, the nation's premier institution of “uplift,” with a limited-access copy of Marx's classic, that Patterson would begin her lifelong embrace of Communist and internationalist solutions to racial discrimination and oppression.

W. E. B. Du Bois published the letter Patterson had written to him, describing in sympathetic terms the protest goals and subsequent plight of the striking Hampton students, in the December 1927 issue of the *Crisis*. Although Patterson's name was not mentioned, school administrators guessed the source and were incensed. At the end of the school year, Patterson was pressured by her department head to resign her post, which she did, accepting instead an Urban League fellowship to study at the New York School of

37. Ibid., 355–56.

Social Work. In June 1928, Patterson headed north to the city where she would become embedded first in the cultural and literary flowering of black artists known as the Harlem Renaissance and then in the internationalist politics of the Popular Front.<sup>38</sup>

Scholars writing about Louise Thompson Patterson in connection with the Harlem Renaissance or with black leftist activism in the 1930s have traditionally begun their narratives of her life story at this point: consequently, her brief marriage to the talented author Wallace Thurman is well documented, as is her deep friendship with Langston Hughes and the role that she played in the rift between Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston over their coauthored play, *Mule Bone*.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, her political activism has been described as having developed out of her experiences once she arrived in New York. Through her connections in that city, these accounts suggest, she met James Ford and was named secretary for the coordinating committee that sponsored a group of twenty-two African Americans to travel to the Soviet Union to make a film about racism in America. Although the film was never made, Patterson's ties to internationalists in New York remained strong, so that she was able to continue her activism through the International Workers Order, with which she was affiliated for the next fifteen years, and other groups upon her return from the Soviet Union in 1933.<sup>40</sup>

Viewing the New York City chapters of her life through the lens of her experiences in the South, however, it becomes clear that as far as her political orientations were concerned, the transformative experiences in her life happened not in New York, but rather in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, and Hampton, Virginia. She had already been introduced to and embraced Marxist explanations of the intertwining of racial and class oppressions when she arrived in New York City in 1928, and the South would, for the rest of her life, remain the barometer by which she gauged the progress being made in the struggle for racial equality. Once in New York, she did befriend the celebrated painter Aaron Douglas and his wife, Alta, and by the end of August, she had married Wallace Thurman, the talented author of some of the decade's most influential and provocative works, including *The Blacker the*

38. Kellner, "Thompson [Patterson] Louise," *The Harlem Renaissance*, 354.

39. See, for example, Faith Berry, *Langston Hughes: Before and Beyond Harlem*; Kellner, *The Harlem Renaissance*; and Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, vol. 1, 1902–1941.

40. See, for example, Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem during the Depression*; William Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left*; and Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*.

*Berry, Infants of the Spring*, and publisher of the magazine *Fire!* Her circle of friends and acquaintances did contain many of the leading lights of the Harlem Renaissance, including Langston Hughes and Dorothy West. But her autobiography suggests that it was an already developed impatience with capitalist explanations of indigence, which failed to recognize the structural roots of persistent poverty, that led her to abandon her Urban League fellowship and her master's degree at the New York School of Social Work within months:

We'd read all the case histories and you had to develop a diagnosis and a prognosis. All of them turned out pretty much the same. There was a pattern. What was the cause of poverty? It was desertion, drunkenness, never the real social conditions that affected the family. This was before the Great Depression; there was no welfare program. There were only the settlement houses and the Charity Organization Society. I hated their approach; it was always based on the personal lives of people, never the social conditions that shaped their lives.<sup>41</sup>

And it was this same impatience with the racist paternalism of white benefactors—an impatience Patterson had already learned at Hampton—that led her to sever her ties to Harlem Renaissance patron Charlotte Osgood Mason after having been employed for only one year by the wealthy benefactor as a typist for Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston.

Instead, inspired by her reading of *Das Kapital*, Patterson chose consciousness raising and organizing for black equality to make her mark on the Harlem Renaissance and, more important, on the South and on the nation. First, in 1930, she accepted a job as the assistant to the director of the Congregational Education Society, a liberal organization interested in the related problems of race and labor relations. The job allowed Patterson to conduct seminars on race relations aboard a Pullman car that traveled throughout the South (except for Birmingham, Alabama, where the organization was denied the right to appear). Patterson also edited the Congregational Education Society's newsletter, spreading the organization's message about the "relations of labor along with relations of race," and represented the society at the American Interracial Seminar held in Mexico in 1930.<sup>42</sup>

41. "The Life and Times of Louise Thompson Patterson," box 19, folder 20, 12.

42. Founded in 1815 as the American Education Society, the Congregational Education Society in the first decades of the twentieth century was dedicated to helping state and local church forces organize and develop educational programs. The catalyst for the



Next, Patterson began attending classes at the Workers School in an effort to further develop her own understanding of Marxist economic theory. Organized by the Communist Party of the United States of America with evening classes held at its headquarters on East Thirteenth Street, the school had an enrollment of three thousand students in the early 1930s and offered students a choice of classes on the history of the labor movement, dialectical materialist philosophy, Marxist economics, and political science. "I remember reading *Origin of the Family and State and Revolution*," Patterson recalled of her continuing education at the school.<sup>43</sup>

Finally, in December 1931, with the help of artist Augusta Savage, Patterson founded the left-wing group Vanguard, which she ran out of her Convent Avenue apartment in Harlem. It sponsored theater performances, dances, concerts, and discussions on Marxist theory for the Harlem Renaissance artists, writers, and intellectuals with whom Patterson had developed friendships. The group soon metamorphosed into the Harlem branch of the Friends of the Soviet Union, whose meetings emphasized that nation's "achievement in eliminating racial and religious prejudice, and the progress made by the nonwhite nationalities under the Soviet regime."<sup>44</sup> Organizing lectures and discussion groups—even watching films—Patterson helped encourage in black artists and intellectuals an interest in Soviet accomplishments and an awareness of the interrelationship of racial and class oppressions.

In 1932, Patterson undertook the consciousness-raising project for which she is most often remembered, the film project *Black and White*. Appointed by James A. Ford—then the leading black American Communist and soon to be the party's candidate for vice president—to be the corresponding secretary for the film project, Patterson organized and then joined the cast of twenty-two performers who traveled to the Soviet Union in June 1932 under

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organization's interest in the interrelationship of race and labor is unclear, but for more on the society, see John Von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1992). "The Life and Times of Louise Thompson Patterson," box 19, folder 20, 3, and box 20, folder 5, 7; and Kellner, *The Harlem Renaissance*, 354–55.

43. "The Life and Times of Louise Thompson Patterson," box 20, folder 5, 7. For more on the Workers' School, see William Mandel, *Saying No to Power* (Berkeley: Creative Arts Book Company, 1999). Richard Altenbaugh, *Education for Struggle: the American Labor Colleges of the 1920s and 1930s* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990) situates the Workers' School within the context of the labor college movement in the United States, which saw the creation of similar institutions like Brookwood Labor College in Katonah, New York, and Work People's College in Duluth, Minnesota.

44. Naison, *Communists in Harlem during the Depression*, 67–68.

the auspices of the Meschrabpom Film Corporation of Workers' International to make a movie about racial injustice and oppression in the United States.<sup>45</sup>

*Black and White* had the potential to combine all of Patterson's activist goals into one project: it could raise global awareness of the racial inequality in the United States by presenting a narrative of African American history that began with slavery and ended with lynchings in the twentieth century; it purported to tell a specifically southern story—that of black sharecroppers and of factory workers in Birmingham, Alabama; and it hoped to convince potential audience members of the benefits of collective action. The script depicted labor organizing as the key to overthrowing white supremacist capitalists and ultimately realizing racial equality. Indeed, the last scene of the film, a multiracial, multiethnic demonstration uniting agricultural and factory laborers, included the following action descriptions and dialogue: "black and white workers raising their hands; 'Black and white Unite to Fight! . . . Workingmen of all countries unite, side by side we for freedom will fight. . . . Down with the legal lynching of Negroes and race discrimination! . . . To hell with charity, we want unemployment insurance!'"<sup>46</sup>

Unfortunately, the film project was plagued with problems from the start. Because group members had been forced to pay their own fare for the transatlantic passage, the eclectic group of volunteers included few seasoned performers. Their lack of acting and singing experience—hardly any could even carry a tune—and the dearth of knowledge they exhibited about the lives

45. There are many detailed secondary source accounts of the *Black and White* film project, including Bruce Kellner, "Black and White," in *The Harlem Renaissance*; Jack El-Hai, "Black, White, and Red," *American Heritage* 42 (May/June 1991): 83–92; and David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*. Primary source accounts can be found in Langston Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1956); Hughes, "Moscow and Me: A Noted American Writer Relates His Experiences," *International Literature* 3 (July 1933); Deborah E. McDowell, "Conversations with Dorothy West," in *The Harlem Renaissance Re-examined*, Victor A. Kramer, ed. (New York: AMS Press, 1987); Homer Smith, *Black Man in Red Russia: A Memoir by Homer Smith* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing, 1964); Louise Thompson, "The Soviet Film," *Crisis* 40 (Feb. 1933); and Thompson, "With Langston Hughes in the USSR," *Freedomways* 8 (Spring 1968). And letters written by participants in the film project and other primary sources can be found in the manuscript collections of Louise Thompson Patterson, Special Collections and Archives Division, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University; Langston Hughes Papers, James Weldon Johnson Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University; and Dorothy West, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, Harvard University.

46. "Script of Black and White," Louise Thompson Patterson Papers, box 2, folder 4, 35–36.

and culture of the black working class shocked the film's German-born director Karl Yungmans. Nor was he himself better prepared—he spoke neither English nor Russian, so he could not guide the actors—and he knew, in Langston Hughes's words, “nothing at all about race relations in Alabama, or labor unions, North, South or European.” In the end, however, it was the script that proved most problematic. As the embodiment of what black Communists hoped the future would bring, perhaps, the script may have been accurate, but as a description of the reality of southern race relations, it was a dismal failure. As Langston Hughes later commented on the draft: “With his heart in the right place, the writer's concern for racial freedom and decency had tripped so completely on the stumps of ignorance that his work had fallen as flat as did Don Quixote's valor when good intentions led that slightly demented knight to do battle with he-knew-not-what. . . . The end result was a script improbable to the point of ludicrousness.”<sup>47</sup>

In late August 1932, Meschrapom declared the project postponed; work did not resume, and the film was never made.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, Patterson returned to New York at the end of the year more committed than ever to Communist politics as an effective platform from which African Americans could mount challenges to racism in the United States. As Patterson described the trip in an interview on her return: “Russia was the only place where I was able to forget entirely that I was a Negro. . . . They [Russians] were shocked and unable to understand that we were not allowed equal accommodations with whites here in America. . . . Russia today is the only country in the world that's really fit to live in. I'd live there any time in preference to America.”<sup>49</sup>

Soon after her return, she left her job at the Congregational Education Society, dismissing it as “mostly talk and little or no action,” and became assistant national secretary to the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners (NCDPP). Incensed at the injustice of the Scottsboro case, in which nine black youths between the ages of thirteen and nineteen had

47. Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander*, 76, 87.

48. Competing factions within the group heatedly debated the cause of the film project's demise. For a discussion of the theories proposed by both the film participants and later historians for the film's cancellation, see Claire Nee Nelson, “Black and White,” *Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Cary Wintz and Paul Finkelman (New York: Routledge, 2004).

49. “Prefers Russia Now to Living in America,” *New York Amsterdam News*, Nov. 23, 1932, 5.

been accused of raping two white prostitutes in a railroad boxcar near Scottsboro, Alabama, perfunctorily tried, and then sentenced to death, Patterson found in her work an avenue for the practical application of Marxist theories about consciousness raising and organizing. As the assistant national secretary for the NCDPP, she coordinated and participated in the May 1933 march on Washington, D.C., in which more than three thousand demonstrators assembled to demand the release of the youths. And Patterson was among the twenty-five representatives from the Scottsboro Action Committee with whom President Franklin Delano Roosevelt refused to meet.<sup>50</sup>

Patterson went on to mobilize laborers, joining the International Workers Order (IWO) in 1933 as an organizer. The IWO was the fastest growing fraternal benefit society in the United States in the 1930s: between 1930 and 1940, membership swelled from 3,000 to 165,000. Michael Denning notes three sources of that success: its low-cost insurance provided to workers in high-risk occupations and minority laborers without discrimination in rates; a multiethnic and inclusive organizational system that united smaller ethnicity-based fraternal lodges under the umbrella of workingmen's solidarity; and the group's Popular Front anti-Fascist political culture.<sup>51</sup> Patterson's memoirs confirm that the egalitarian insurance rates and her faith in the IWO's organizing mission were in large part responsible for her fifteen-year tenure there:

I didn't stay very long as a clerical worker [for the IWO] because I was sitting there writing these policies, and seeing people paying and getting a policy for a thousand dollars or two thousand or three thousand dollars, and I began to think, well, this is something the black people should be interested in. Because black people, I got to know, as I was around working in the South . . . could never afford adequate insurance. And what little they could manage was doled out in demeaning ways. I remember that in every black neighborhood, one day a week you would see these white insurance agencies weaving their way through the black community, coming to the door, never taking off their hats: "Is Maggie in?" Standing there in all of their arrogance and white supremacy and collecting the nickels, dimes, quarters or fifty cent pieces from black folk that netted them a policy anywhere from \$100-\$150. So they never had a kind of insurance that would be adequate even to bury them, to leave

50. "The Life and Times of Louise Thompson Patterson," box 20, folder 3, 1, and folder 4, 2-8.

51. Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 75.

something for the families. It was a scandal. . . . It was logical that we should turn our attention first to the South, where the Negro people face the greatest discrimination, and where there is the greatest need for the low-cost, non-discriminatory insurance offered by the International Workers Order.<sup>52</sup>

Patterson lobbied for, and was quickly given, an appointment to organize lodges of the IWO among African American workers in southern cities. By February 1934, she was on her way to Birmingham, Alabama, with a letter from Max Bedacht, the general secretary of the IWO, certifying her as “organizer and representative of the International Workers Order,” and noting that “[a]ll help that may be extended to her in this work will be very much appreciated.”<sup>53</sup>

What she found upon her arrival was “the meanest town I’ve ever been in in my life.”<sup>54</sup> Segregation in Birmingham was more virulent than in any other southern city she had visited. And because an unprecedented wave of strikes by miners and textile workers had thrown the city into the national spotlight the year before, Birmingham’s police, judges, and city officials were particularly hostile due to what they perceived to be the influence of “outside agitators.” Just three months after Thompson’s arrival, she was thrown into jail after walking into an apartment that was being raided by Birmingham’s police. Held for days without access to counsel and unable to notify anyone of her imprisonment, Patterson was threatened with a beating with a rubber hose and told that “Birmingham is a good place for good niggers—but a damn bad place for bad niggers.” She was tried by a judge who surrounded himself at the bench with members of the city’s White Legion and whose only question to Patterson during the trial referred derisively to her racial background. Ultimately unwilling to bend the law so far as to “arrest the gal for being an octoroon,” the judge dismissed the case, but not before the court bailiff told Patterson:

So you’re one of those \_\_\_\_ reds what thinks you are going to get social equality for niggers down here in the South. Well, we think Communists are lower than niggers, down here—fact is, we don’t even allow them to ‘sociate

52. “The Life and Times of Louise Thompson Patterson,” box 20, folder 4, 12; and “Testimony by Louise Thompson Patterson on behalf of the International Workers Order,” 24.

53. “Max Bedacht to Whom it May Concern, Feb. 24, 1934,” Louise Thompson Patterson Papers, box 8, folder 8.

54. “The Life and Times of Louise Thompson Patterson,” box 20, folder 4, 18.

with white folks, let alone have white folks 'sociating with niggers. We know how to treat our niggers down here and we ain't going to stand for no interference from you \_\_\_\_ yankee reds. We ought to handle you reds like Mussolini does 'em in Italy—take you out and shoot you against a wall. And I sure would like to have the pleasure of doing it.<sup>55</sup>

Far from deterring Patterson, the experience inspired her to continue fighting racial inequality in the South by advocating collective action. Although Birmingham had become too dangerous for her to continue her organizing work there, she moved on to Atlanta and New Orleans to mobilize laborers for the Popular Front. By November 1934, no less an authority on African American intellectuals and activists than the *Crisis* was calling her “the leading colored woman in the Communist movement in this country.”<sup>56</sup>

In 1940, Patterson married the man who had first introduced her to *Das Kapital*: William Lorenzo Patterson. The executive director of the International Labor Defense Committee and an attorney for the Scottsboro nine, William L. Patterson was relocating to Chicago to found the Abraham Lincoln School—an experimental black college whose curriculum was heavily influenced by socialist theory. “I had in mind a school in which we would teach how society had developed its class structure, how it functioned and was held together, what social forces dominated it and how those who were exploited and oppressed could escape,” he later wrote of the school.<sup>57</sup> Louise Thompson Patterson actively supported his efforts by organizing fundraisers for the school, including a concert at which Lena Horne performed. And when William L. Patterson went on to head the Civil Rights Congress, and to author “We Charge Genocide”—the petition to the United Nations that charged the United States with perpetuating genocide against African Americans—Louise Thompson Patterson joined such notable women as Charlotte Bass, Shirley Graham, and Alice Childress in founding the congress’s black women’s auxiliary, the Sojourners for Truth and Justice. In 1970, she served as the chair of the New York Committee to Free Angela Davis, and in 1971 she toured Great Britain as part of this campaign. Louise Thompson Patterson died in New York on August 27, 1999.<sup>58</sup>

55. Louise Thompson, “Southern Terror,” *Crisis* 41: 11 (Nov. 1934): 327–28.

56. *Ibid.*, 327.

57. William L. Patterson, *The Man Who Cried Genocide: An Autobiography* (New York: International Publishers, 1971) 150.

58. See Nelson, “Louise Thompson Patterson.”

Louise Thompson Patterson's involvement in the *Black and White* film project, her organizing on behalf of the Scottsboro youths, her marriage to and work with William L. Patterson, and her fifteen-year career with the International Workers Order are often taken as evidence of the ways in which her residence in New York City and her acquaintance with that city's leftist circles developed in her an active interest in internationalist political causes and issues. A longer examination of her life's work, however, suggests that the foundation of her radical political affiliations had already been established by the time she arrived in New York. Her experiences as a teacher at the Agricultural, Mechanical, and Normal College in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, had made plain the interconnections between racial violence, the sham of industrial education, and the destitution of black farmers in the surrounding countryside. And her tenure as an instructor at Hampton Institute clearly demonstrated the failure of "uplift" as a road for African Americans toward racial equality. The inseparability of racial and class oppressions that Patterson discovered in the three years she spent in the South would inform all her subsequent ventures, and throughout them all—through all the consciousness-raising exercises and the efforts to mobilize laborers in which she engaged over the course of her lifetime—the South would forever remain the touchstone by which she gauged the results of her lifelong efforts to achieve racial equality.

## Women's and Girls' Activism in 1960s Southwest Georgia

### Rethinking History and Historiography

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*Alisa Y. Harrison*

On August 3, 1962, Gloria Ward and Kay Smith—two high school students from Albany, Georgia, one black and one white—made the front page of the *Macon News*. Under the headline, “Why They March: The Albany Disturbance—A Story in Black and White,” the Associated Press article pitted the two women against each other in a debate over the merits and progress of the civil rights movement in their city. Although Ward declared her belief that the struggle would someday “prick the conscience of white people” and bring an end to “color prejudice,” Smith scoffed, “I think it’s useless.” To Smith, the movement was a “stunt.” She dismissed the mass jailings and protests and proclaimed, “[The movement] doesn’t bother my conscience about segregation.”<sup>1</sup>

Thirty-five years later, as a staff writer for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Smith revisited her youthful comments about the Albany movement. Her

I wish to acknowledge the financial support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Duke University, and the University of British Columbia, and to thank the following people who provided detailed feedback on drafts of this paper and on the earlier work on which it is based: Thavolia Glymph, Paul Krause, Judith McArthur, Christina Greene, Susan Thorne, David Cecelski, Lawrence Goodwyn, Joy Dixon, Joan Browning, and Jacquelyn Dowd Hall and the participants in her Spring 2002 Research Seminar in Women’s History at the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill.

1. “Why They March: The Albany Disturbance—A Story in Black and White,” *Macon News*, Aug. 3, 1962 (clippings file, Albany Mt. Zion Civil Rights Movement



views had been changing since an antisegregation girlfriend had taken her to visit one of Albany's poorest black neighborhoods and since the devastating church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama, which killed four young girls in 1963. Smith hoped to meet with Ward and print a public apology to her, "the one person [she] could identify who had to have been hurt by [her] insulting remarks." On an early spring day in 1997, the two women came face-to-face. Before Smith had a chance to speak, Ward said, "I didn't come . . . for you to apologize. I just wanted to know how you were and what you were doing." The meeting was a warm one. As it came to a close, Ward assured Smith, "I've prayed for you all these years, girlfriend." In her article, Smith told the world, "It worked."<sup>2</sup>

Three and a half decades after their initial face-off, Kay Smith and Gloria Ward reconciled in the pages of a major metropolitan newspaper. But their story provides more than a feel-good ending to a traumatic period in southern history. It is an entry point into a counternarrative of the civil rights movement. Smith and Ward's story indicates that the movement was often a struggle to build new social relationships. It attests to the power of personal transformation and suggests that change—in this case, the gradual awakening of one woman's consciousness to the injustice of racial segregation—is a complex process that can move at a snail's pace and that can be propelled by a range of encounters and experiences.

Over the last several decades, activists and scholars have urged us to focus more intently on stories like Smith and Ward's, stories of tiny gestures that, in aggregate, changed the South forever. They have argued that the dramatic accounts of singular leaders and big events that tend to dominate popular representations of the civil rights movement have serious analytical limitations.<sup>3</sup> Activist Joan Browning writes that such top-down discussions of the

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Museum; hereinafter Albany Museum). This paper is drawn from Alisa Y. Harrison, "'Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Round': The Southwest Georgia Freedom Movement and the Politics of Empowerment" (master's thesis, University of British Columbia, 2001).

2. Note that Kay Smith is now Kay Pedrotti and Gloria Ward is now Gloria Wright. I have, however, continued to use their unmarried names in this paragraph for the sake of narrative clarity. Kay Pedrotti, "Relationships," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Apr. 22, 1997 (clippings file, Albany Museum).

3. See the following key examples of scholarly efforts to counter top-down analyses: William Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

movement portray "history as keeping score between winners and losers." Martha Prescod Norman has argued that they apply "a narrow and superficial vision to a broad and deep social terrain," where Martin Luther King's "weight" is "disproportionately felt," and student and women organizers disproportionately ignored. According to participants and scholars, including Browning, Norman, Mary King, Robert Zellner, Jack Chatfield, Clayborne Carson, and Howard Zinn, conventional narratives often downplay the scope of the struggle, chart the movement as a series of reforms and inspirational speeches, and augment the myth that democracy and progress are natural parts of American culture.<sup>4</sup>

The civil rights movement was in fact a fight to dismantle a society based on relationships of domination and subordination and to build a democracy that had never really existed. Opposition to this effort was intense; participants sometimes faltered; and tangible results were slow in coming. This was particularly so in southwest Georgia, where there is ample evidence that the federal, state, and municipal governments cooperated to destroy the movement's formal campaigns; where police concealed their attacks on participants from the press and the American public; and where the often invisible struggle to break down the walls of fear separating blacks from whites was as important as the more obvious one for legal reform.<sup>5</sup> Southwest Georgia, therefore, offers a prime opportunity to reexamine the nature of the freedom

4. Joan C. Browning, "Trends in Feminism and Historiography—Invisible Revolutionaries: White Women in Civil Rights Historiography," *Journal of Women's History* 8 (Fall 1996): 186; Martha Prescod Norman, quoted in *A Circle of Trust: Remembering SNCC*, ed. Cheryl Lynn Greenberg (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 181, 127–51, and 177–79.

5. For evidence of government repression, see "Federal Prosecution and Civil Rights in Albany, Georgia," Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers 1959–1972, hereinafter SNCC, subgroup A, series 7, file 4 (hereinafter A:7:4), reel 14 (Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change), microfilm, University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill; "Where Was the Federal Government?" SNCC, A:7:1, reel 13; Faith Holsaert and Elizabeth Holtzman statement, 1963, SNCC, A:4:201, reel 7; "Memorandum on Facts," SNCC, A:8:102, reel 19; Report on Federal Prosecution of Civil Rights Workers in Albany, Georgia. Bay Area Friends of SNCC, 1963, SNCC, A:8:102, reel 19. Also see Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954–1963* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 601–32; David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: W. Morrow, 1986), esp. 210–18; and Allen Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984). For more on combating fear, see Charles Sherrod, "Non-Violence," pp. 1–2, SNCC, A:4:250, reel 7; Robert Mants Jr., Report from Americus, Sept. 30–Oct. 5, 1963, SNCC, A:7:20, reel 17; Kathleen Conwell, Lee County Voter Registration Project Report, July 1962, SNCC, A:4:215, reel 7; Peggy Dammond, Lee County Project Report, July 1962, SNCC, A:4:215, reel 7.

struggle and the meanings of people's actions within it. This important movement has largely escaped close, extended scholarly attention, and a top-down analysis persists as the primary interpretation, but it is ripe for reappraisal.

Few scholars have emphasized the southwest Georgia movement, and important questions about the details and character of the movement remain unasked. With only a handful of exceptions, scholars and observers of the movement in southwest Georgia tend to remember it in two problematic ways, neither of which reflects the full scope of the struggle.<sup>6</sup> It was a failed fight in Albany, where for two isolated periods thousands of local people marched, protested, and went to jail at the behest of Martin Luther King Jr. and then retreated from activism, allowing the movement to die after only brief episodes of visible struggle. It was also a "singing" movement, where mass meetings, marches, and jail-ins were fueled by African American spirituals and freedom songs, and where exuberance and emotion, both supposedly absent from politics, were the most important things.

The first characterization, that of southwest Georgia as one of the civil rights movement's earliest failures, is the basis on which most scholars dismiss it as a mere prelude to future, presumably more significant uprisings, like those in Alabama and Mississippi. The standard narrative of southwest Georgia—the one that, despite some interventions to the contrary, dominates both academic and popular accounts and that remains a thorn in the side of many movement participants—claims that the movement arose in 1961 after decades of African American accommodation to racism and Jim Crow. The story generally follows the trajectory of King's arrival during the first period of mass arrests, his subsequent jailings and negotiations with city officials, and his ultimate decision that he could not lead the Albany movement to a conclusive victory. According to most scholars, the movement collapsed in 1962 when King turned his attention elsewhere. Because they con-

6. The primary exceptions are studies by Stephen Tuck and Michael Chalfen, both of whom consider the story of southwest Georgia in and of itself, in addition to recognizing it as one scene in a national story. Chalfen's work is particularly important because it argues for a significantly expanded periodization of this movement. See Stephen G.N. Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Georgia, 1940–1980* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2001), esp. 147–53, 160–72, and 179; and Michael Chalfen, "The Way out May Lead In: The Albany Movement beyond Martin Luther King, Jr.," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 79 (1995): 560–98. See also Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995 [1981]), esp. chaps. 5 and 6.

sider the movement's history almost exclusively as King's failed fight against Jim Crow in Albany, scholars frame the southwest Georgia movement as an urban, top-down battle limited to legal and political civil rights reform. This narrative overemphasizes King's leadership, fails to take into account the smaller-scale activism and patterns of protest that occurred both before and after his time in the city, and offers a limited analysis of success in democratic mass protest.<sup>7</sup>

But the second characterization is in some ways more disturbing because it relies on assumptions about African American activism and culture that are seldom unpacked or substantiated. Scholars and observers note the prevalence of singing in Albany and the 1962 founding there of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) Freedom Singers, but the freedom songs receive attention not for their historically specific, political origins, but because they are evidence of a supposedly "traditional" and "natural"—and thus ahistorical—impulse to expressive protest in black communities.<sup>8</sup> The singing of freedom songs such as "We Shall Overcome," and "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me 'Round," became a defining feature of civil rights activism across the country during the 1960s. But emphasis on the ubiquity of the songs tends to overshadow the important fact that freedom songs had particular roots in the movement in southwest Georgia. While this chapter is not about the freedom songs per se, it is very much an investigation into some of the reasons why most scholars have explained them inadequately and missed an opportunity to explore in depth a unique aspect of an early local movement.<sup>9</sup> The nature of scholarly attention to cultural and purportedly nonpolitical, "traditional" forms of activity such as freedom songs is the

7. Tuck's and Chalfen's interventions, though extremely important and insightful, have not yet superseded the influential narratives of the Albany movement in Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 524–558, 601–32, 639, and 864–68; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 173–230; and David Levering Lewis, *King: A Critical Biography* (New York: Praeger, 1970), 140–70.

8. In addition to work previously cited, see, for example, the documentary, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years*, vol. 2 (PBS Home Video, 1987); James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997); and Pat Watters, *Down to Now: Reflections on the Southern Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971).

9. For instance, Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: the Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Knopf, 1979), esp. 52–53. Bernice Johnson Reagon's work provides an important exception to this trend, particularly her comments in Greenberg, *Circle of Trust*, 110–26, and Reagon, "Songs of the Civil Rights Movement 1955–1965: A Study in Culture Movement" (Ph.D. diss., Howard University, 1975).

inspiration for this exploration of the problematic conceptual frameworks that have been applied to studying civil rights history in southwest Georgia.

In most histories of the movement, culture and tradition—evident in the interpersonal relationships that formed at protests and in freedom houses where activists lived, and in the political cast to African American homes and families—recede into the background as mere motivation and support for the struggle, rather than as primary elements of the movement itself, elements that shaped and were shaped by particular historical actors in particular historical contexts. This recession is especially problematic because it erases the work of women and girls who initiated and maintained struggles within African American homes throughout the region, and who took on the majority of the movement's visible, public work as they carried out voter registration drives, participated in mass meetings and marches, and went to jail. Women and girls, especially black women and girls, become invisible in the struggle, either because their efforts do not seem to matter in stories devoted to formal political change or because they are romanticized as representatives of a stock "tradition" of "strong black women," and rendered timeless, outside of history.

A diverse group of scholars has already begun to evoke women's voices as part of an ongoing effort to challenge dominant views of the 1960s' freedom struggle. This scholarship is broad, and cuts across several disciplines, most notably history and sociology. Charles Payne, Kathryn Nasstrom, and Barbara Ransby have demonstrated in particularly compelling ways how studying women's activism fundamentally alters our ideas about the periodization of the civil rights movement, the meaning of politics, success and failure in social movements, and African American traditions of struggle.<sup>10</sup>

Yet while many other scholars have documented women's activism, few have sought to explain it beyond saying that black women took action against racial oppression because they followed in the footsteps of their mothers and grandmothers, and that white women acted because they were inspired

10. Foundational studies of women in the movement include, but are certainly not limited to Evans, *Personal Politics*; Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Morrow, 1984); and Vicki Crawford, Jacqueline Rouse and Barbara Woods, eds., *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941–1965* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1990). See also, Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*; Kathryn Nasstrom, "Down to Now: Memory, Narrative, and Women's Leadership in the Civil Rights Movement," *Gender and History* 11 (1999): 113–44; and Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

by their stronger black sisters, for whom gender did not preclude political participation. While these explanations can be useful, neither is sufficient to situate women's insurgency within its full political and historical context.<sup>11</sup> It is time to complicate the claims that black women's activism and the power of black homes in the movement were simply the continuation of a legacy of struggle and to recognize tradition as an effect as well as a cause of historical events. We can begin to do this by examining black and white women's particular positions and their specific actions early in the mass civil rights struggle of the 1960s, in the city of Albany and the counties of southwest Georgia.

Understanding SNCC's place in the history of the movement in southwest Georgia is crucial to understanding how black and white women's activism developed there in the 1960s. SNCC was a group unlike any other in its ability to organize those who were most disfranchised—women, poor people, and people of color—in struggle. Field secretaries Charles Sherrod and Cordell Reagon established SNCC's southwest Georgia project in Albany in the fall of 1961. SNCC appealed immediately to the high school and college students who were already beginning to intensify their protests and make bolder demands for social and political change, because SNCC focused on them: Sherrod and Reagon came as students to help other students organize their own movement. But SNCC also reached beyond students to attract participants from all parts of the community, and its cooperative ethos brought all southwest Georgians a new sense of possibility and a new level of organization.

Participants in the southwest Georgia movement—local residents as well as SNCC workers—appear to have included people from all social classes, from farmers and domestic workers to students to business owners and professionals. At the same time, there are hints that some animosity existed between working- and middle-class black participants. Prior to SNCC's involvement, activism in southwest Georgia seems to have been skewed toward middle-class participation, as it was spearheaded by students and adults associated either with Albany State College, the NAACP, or often both, and middle-class community groups. Class divisions in this movement remain to be examined, and a more focused comparison of the activism of

11. Some striking examples of this type of scholarship are Bernice McNair Barnett, "Invisible Southern Black Leaders in the Civil Rights Movement: The Triple Constraints of Gender, Race, and Class," *Gender and Society* 7 (June 1993): 162–82; Evans, *Personal Politics*; and Teresa A. Nance, "Hearing the Missing Voice," *Journal of Black Studies* 26 (May 1996): 543–59.

people from different class locations—both before and after the formal campaigns of the 1960s—will further complicate and generate important new insights into the dynamics of this struggle. In the meantime, it is important to recognize SNCC's contribution to the movement, as an antihierarchical, antibureaucratic organization that offered those with the least power unique opportunities to mount a struggle.<sup>12</sup>

SNCC's specific reason for establishing itself in Albany was to launch a voter registration drive and to challenge the city's refusal to comply with the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) ruling that prohibited racial segregation in interstate transportation and terminal facilities. These initial campaigns cemented the group's significance to local protests, and only weeks into its stay SNCC proved crucial to mobilizing residents for action and organizing the mass movement.<sup>13</sup> But while SNCC changed the shape and direction of the region's formal campaigns, it did not initiate the struggle in southwest Georgia. Rather, SNCC engaged the activists already working in the region and nurtured a movement that was already developing.

Well before SNCC's arrival, African Americans in southwest Georgia were working in a variety of ways to improve their living conditions, to raise awareness about the issues facing their communities, and to fight back against the conventions of Jim Crow. In the first half of the twentieth century, African Americans launched initiatives on their own behalf, and there is evidence that at least some white people in southwest Georgia were also committed to changing the system of racial segregation and discrimination. Following World War I, Albany's black residents founded an active chapter of the NAACP and then developed a variety of community groups—both formal and informal—dedicated to neighborhood upkeep, education, and health care. In the 1940s, black Albanians established a Voters League and a branch of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund in order to increase black political participation and to challenge southwest Georgia's capricious and racist judicial system. In 1942, Clarence and Florence Jordan, a white, Christian couple, founded Koinonia Community Farm on several hundred acres of land in Sumter County outside of Albany. Koinonia would provide black and white farm workers with well-paid jobs and demonstrate that integrated living

12. Annette Jones White, interview with author, by telephone, Nov. 8, 2000; John Perdew, interview with author, Albany, GA, Oct. 27, 2000; McCree Harris, interviews with Angela Whitmal, Albany, GA, Nov. 6, 1997 and Nov. 13, 1997, transcripts (Albany Museum).

13. White, interview.

was possible. It would also serve as a major source of support for interracial civil rights organizations in southwest Georgia during the 1960s.<sup>14</sup>

During the 1950s, African Americans in southwest Georgia became increasingly militant following the landmark Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and the yearlong bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama. By the end of the decade, signs emerged of the direct-action protests that would make the Albany movement famous. African American maids in neighboring Terrell County launched a successful one-day strike for better pay.<sup>15</sup> Community leaders in Albany began petitioning the city commission in 1957 for better living conditions and an end to segregation. Before the first publicized lunch counter sit-in in Greensboro, North Carolina, in February 1960, black students in Albany were holding impromptu sit-ins at restaurants and movie theaters. They organized formally in 1959 as an NAACP Youth Council chapter; by early 1961 students at Albany State College, a traditionally black institution in the University of Georgia system, were holding rallies and writing letters to the editor of the *Albany Herald* to protest racism and harassment.

Albany State College students confronted a range of racially motivated abuses in 1961—including physical attacks and cross-burnings on campus—but they were particularly outraged over the school administration's efforts to suppress their activism. The administration's policies were so restrictive, and its interest in the students' problems was so little, that Dean of Students Irene Asbury Wright felt compelled to resign in protest. Among other things, college officials ignored the repeated harassment of female students by white men from town, and when it became clear that Sherrod and Reagon were encouraging student protests, they banned SNCC's field secretaries from the campus. The administration's resistance to the students' growing activism and their association with SNCC became especially clear when Dean Charles Minor suspended students Bertha Gober and Blanton Hall "indefinitely," without a hearing, after they were arrested for testing the ICC ruling on Thanksgiving weekend. These suspensions, and the students' decisions to remain in jail rather than be released on bond, galvanized the black population and

14. Peggy Dammond report, June 1962, SNCC, A:9:19, reel 25; letter from Gene Singletary to Sandra (Casey) Hayden, ca. Dec. 1961, Joan Browning papers (Emory University, Special Collections, copies in the author's possession). See also Tracy Elaine K'Meyer, *Interracialism and Christian Community in the Postwar South: The Story of Koinonia Community Farm* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997).

15. Perdew, interview.



drew parents and children together in protest. Indeed, that same November weekend, the newly formed Albany Movement—the umbrella organization that was to coordinate the city’s civil rights protests—began to convene communitywide mass meetings, and would soon endorse the mass marches and jail-ins that would come to define the high point of the movement.<sup>16</sup>

SNCC’s southwest Georgia project energized the young insurgents in Albany and the surrounding counties and compelled adult leaders to move more quickly to keep pace with the increasingly militant students. On December 10, 1961, the world became aware of the struggle as an integrated group of Freedom Riders arrived at Albany’s train station. Albany was the only location in the South that had refused to comply with the November ICC ruling. The Freedom Riders—Joan Browning, Norma Collins, James Forman, Tom Hayden, Per Laursen, Bernard Lee, Lenora Tait, Robert Zellner, and Casey Hayden—were fully within their rights to ride together from Atlanta to Albany and enter the Albany train station as an integrated group. Yet eight of the nine individuals, who had simply and legally integrated a Central of Georgia Railway car, as well as two African American residents and a SNCC field secretary who had come to meet them, were promptly arrested and jailed by city police. (Casey Hayden participated as an “undercover” observer so that she could avoid being arrested and thus work as the liaison between demonstrators, SNCC, SNCC supporters, the press, and law enforcement.) Later, the Freedom Riders were convicted on state charges of disturbing the peace and refusal to disperse. Mass demonstrations continued, and by December 13, police were holding over seven hundred protesters in the city and county jails. On December 15, 1961, William Anderson, the president of the Albany Movement, called a friend of his wife’s, Martin Luther King, to speak at a mass meeting at Shiloh Baptist Church to help build popular support. King’s presence attracted so many people—an estimated 1,500—that the meeting spilled out of Shiloh and into Mt. Zion Baptist Church across the street.<sup>17</sup> Although he was only in Albany a short time, King’s charisma

16. White, interview; Howard Zinn, *Albany*, Southern Regional Council, 1962, p. 9, SNCC, A:4:340, reel 9; Sherrod report, SNCC, A:15:31, reel 37; news clipping, SNCC, A:15:51, reel 37.

17. For an excellent discussion of the controversial historiography of the Albany Freedom Ride, see Browning, “Trends in Feminism and Historiography,” 186–204; Albany Police Department Report, SNCC, A:8:102, reel 19; Zinn, *Albany*, p. 1, SNCC, A:4:340, reel 9; William G. Anderson, “Reflections on the Origins of the Albany Movement,” *Journal of Southwest Georgia History* 9 (Fall 1994): 9.

and his inspiring speeches moved participants, and his presence symbolized the resistance that was brewing in southwest Georgia.

After the December arrests, King and members of the Albany Movement's board agreed to postpone any additional marches or demonstrations in return for concessions from the city. However, no figurehead—indeed, no leaders of any kind—could stop people from protesting, especially when it became clear that Albany's civic leaders had no intention of making good on their promises to release jailed protesters and begin the process of desegregation. In January 1962, students, represented by Annette Jones, who had been crowned Miss Albany State, and parents, represented by Mrs. Emma Barry, protested the expulsion of another forty-two Albany State College students for taking part in the previous month's demonstrations. Choosing a tactic proven effective by such acclaimed women as Rosa Parks, Ida B. Wells, and Sojourner Truth, Ola Mae Quarterman, a nineteen-year-old student expelled from Albany State, refused to leave her seat at the front of a city bus. She told the driver, "I paid my damn twenty cents, and I can sit where I want." Quarterman's defiance and subsequent jailing sparked a bus boycott; the boycott then compelled domestic workers to form a carpool that eventually forced the bus company out of business.<sup>18</sup>

Simultaneously, the movement launched a selective buying campaign on January 23. The campaign attacked Albany's white businesses in order to tackle segregation's economic base, and it was aimed at stores in the downtown core. Its immediate impact was limited since African Americans tended to avoid shopping downtown and often patronized businesses in the black district of Harlem instead. However, the boycott did cause several downtown shops to close and deprived the *Albany Herald* of important advertising revenue.<sup>19</sup> It also served as additional evidence of African American residents' willingness to stand up against segregation in Albany and their ability to organize the community and effect change.

By allying itself with students and their parents in the earliest months of

18. Southwest Georgia Project Report, SNCC, A:4:341, reel 9; Charles Jones news report form, SNCC, A:4:195, reel 7; Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 262; Quarterman, quoted in Fred Powledge, *Free at Last? The Civil Rights Movement and the People Who Made It* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1991), 373; Donald Harris interview in Emily Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee: The Growth of Radicalism in a Civil Rights Organization* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1989), 148.

19. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 190–210; Carol King, interview with author, by telephone, Jan. 16, 2001.

its project in Albany, SNCC invigorated and expanded the preexisting local movement. The formal campaign continued into its second year, and SNCC broadened its efforts, initiating projects in the rural counties and drawing many new people into southwest Georgia's struggle, including people from outside the region. In a significant move that would eventually be repeated in movements across the South, including the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer, the southwest Georgia project recruited full-time white civil rights workers. Beginning in June 1962 with the arrival of Penny Patch, a nineteen-year-old college student from Swarthmore, the movement in Albany also became the first to count white women as full-time field-workers equal to men.<sup>20</sup>

The integrated project sent important messages to both segregationists and to movement participants themselves. By living in southwest Georgia for extended periods of time and being seen as "black and white together," SNCC workers posed a head-on, daily challenge to segregation and its supporters. Patch wrote from Lee County in December 1962 that SNCC workers took integration into their own hands:

Here, for the first time, all southerners are able to see Negroes and whites working side by side as equals and as friends. . . . We are confronting the community with what should be and what will be. We are *showing* here and now, rather than talking about black and white together, that a dream can be a reality, and that words can mean something. . . all of us are, in our own individual ways, fighting for a new community.<sup>21</sup>

Black and white cooperation within the project was also central to SNCC's attempt to empower black residents of southwest Georgia. Living in the white supremacist South had conditioned many African Americans to act submissive toward whites. SNCC's integrated project demonstrated that not all white people wanted deferential treatment. In subtle but significant ways, white SNCC workers encouraged black people to develop confidence and to demand respect. In July 1962, for example, Patch declined the seat that an elderly black woman offered her. Field-worker Peggy Dammond wrote, "[I]magine an elderly lady offering her a seat . . . we later all realized the value that had occurred by Penny's refusal. This perhaps is one small bit of progress. That lady will not forget." Over time, participants in the movement—

20. Browning, in Constance Curry, et al., *Deep in Our Hearts: Nine White Women in the Freedom Movement* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 67; Charles Sherrod, interview with author, Albany, GA, October 27, 2000.

21. Penny Patch report to Wiley Branton, Voter Education Project, Dec. 8, 1962, SNCC, A:4:296, reel 8.

SNCC workers and residents of southwest Georgia—began to question the significance of both race and gender in their daily lives and became more certain that identity should not determine who sat and who stood or who performed what type of work.<sup>22</sup>

Sherrod explains that in the movement, “nobody [cared] what color you are, what gender you are . . . if you’re going to take a few of these blows off my head. If I am still alive because you’re here . . . then what the hell do I care about who you are?”<sup>23</sup> He invited white people into the project for pragmatic reasons and because it was an opportunity to model the ideal of integration that SNCC was working toward in its formal campaign. However, the exigencies of the situation meant that SNCC’s ideal of blindness to race and gender was not always possible. This was particularly true when it came to managing white women’s participation in SNCC’s project.

White participation alarmed opponents of the movement in southwest Georgia, and white women’s presence in SNCC’s interracial project proved especially disturbing. Like their male counterparts, white women undermined the racial hierarchy when they moved into southwest Georgia’s strictly segregated cities and towns to live and work with African Americans. But their presence also destabilized a system based on white men’s control of women’s bodies. By joining an interracial movement against white supremacy, white women angered the white men who felt it was their right and duty to control women’s public behavior; the men, in turn, tried to exert power over the women whenever possible. In a December 1961 letter, Joan Browning, a young white woman from Milledgeville, Georgia, wrote of the personal danger she faced as one of two white female volunteers involved with the Freedom Ride: “Rumor has it that I am a special mark. The white men feel that they should take steps to save me from myself and these people I’m with. They can’t get over my All-American, innocent look.” On May 21, 1963, guards strip-searched SNCC field-worker Joni Rabinowitz in full view of male prisoners in the Albany city jail. Faith Holsaert reported being molested by police in jail the following day. Penny Patch remembers being singled out and threatened by guards in the courthouse in Smithville, outside of Albany, and she was questioned by police on more than one occasion when riding in a car at night alongside African Americans.<sup>24</sup>

22. Dammond report, July 1962, SNCC, A:4:215, reel 7.

23. Sherrod, interview.

24. *Ibid.*; Southwest Georgia Project: Report and Proposals, Dec. 27, 1963, SNCC, A:4:341, reel 9; letter to Faye Powell, Dec. 12, 1961, Browning papers; News release, May 24, 1963, SNCC, A:7:3, reel 13; Penny Patch, interview with author, Albany, Georgia,

SNCC workers did what they could to minimize the risks they took when they included white women in the project. Sherrod states that “nothing boiled [white people’s] blood quicker than a black man holding the hand of a white woman.” SNCC organizers were careful not to be seen having any kind of intimate contact with one another—Sherrod says they were careful to “not be quickly killed”—and white women did not canvass alone with black men. All were aware that white women’s mere presence as volunteers in a black-led organization and as residents in the African American community was subversive: SNCC incited the white community’s anger because it contravened a basic premise of segregation: white women were to be kept separate from black men at any price.<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, field-worker Prathia Hall reported in February 1963 that bringing white men into Terrell County “was havoc for the white power structure. Now, we are moving in a white girl . . . [and] as soon as the white community learns that a white girl is living with us, they [will] no doubt respond in some way.” According to Hall, Faith Holsaert’s presence created “a potentially explosive situation,” which SNCC organizers worked in vain to control. In spite of SNCC’s best efforts to protect her and her companions, Holsaert did become a target of violence when a group of local white men shot into the Terrell County freedom house where she lived, riddling the walls with bullets and injuring and terrorizing the civil rights workers inside. Yet even in the face of controversy and danger, SNCC organizers continued to recruit white women into the project. Sherrod says he simply wanted numbers: he wanted committed volunteers—male or female, black or white—and he wanted volunteers whose participation would bring money and nationwide attention to the fledgling movement. Whatever his motivation, Sherrod’s decision to integrate white women from across the country into the southwest Georgia project marked a defining moment in the history of the civil rights movement.<sup>26</sup>

SNCC institutionalized white women’s involvement in the movement. After the first white SNCC woman arrived in southwest Georgia, white women field-workers gradually became commonplace in the organization’s cam-

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October 27, 2000; Joan Maxwell, sworn affidavit to the U.S. Justice Department, July 29, 1962, SNCC, A:8:114, reel 19; Dammond report, July 1962, SNCC, A:4:215, reel 7.

25. Patch, in Curry, et al., *Deep in our Hearts*, 152; Patch, interview; Faith Holsaert, interview with author, by telephone, Nov. 22, 2000; Sherrod, interview.

26. Prathia Hall report, Feb.–Mar. 1963, SNCC, A:4:155, reel 6; Patch, interview; Joan Maxwell, sworn affidavit to the U.S. Justice Department, July 29, 1962, SNCC, A:8:114, reel 19; Dammond Report, July 1962, SNCC, A:4:215, reel 7; Sherrod, interview.

paigns throughout the South. At the same time, white women outside of SNCC were drawn into the movement in less formal ways. In the 1960s, and perhaps before, local black women worked independently of civil rights organizations to recruit local white women into the struggle. Annette Jones White remembers being part of a black women's "telephoning group" that, she jokes, would call white women at home "during the day while their husbands were off making plans for us." According to White, black women felt they could "call the white women and talk with them on a woman-to-woman basis, even though we were their babysitters and cooks." She reports that white women cried when they learned how vulnerable African Americans were to violence and harassment; black women realized how blind white women could be to the racial politics of their own communities even as those politics also circumscribed their lives. In one-on-one conversations away from public scrutiny and the judgments of their husbands, black and white women shared stories of their personal struggles and the challenges they faced. Black women callers created a space in which white and black women could listen to each other, and black women initiated new relationships that ran counter to the prevailing morals and politics of their society. The story of this telephoning group suggests an independent history—whatever its impact and extent may prove to be—of local black women working to secure white women's cooperation against Jim Crow.<sup>27</sup>

Whether motivated by contact with the telephoning group or by other experiences, some local white women were moved to action as well as sympathy. Mary Sterner Lawson of what is now Albany State University refers to a photograph from the early 1960s that depicts a prim white woman in a flowered dress over a crinoline, face and body taut with anger, rebuking some dumbfounded white men for abusing a group of African American protesters. This woman, whose identity and activities beyond the moments captured in the photograph remain a mystery, apparently capped off her invective by sitting down alongside the protesters, joining them in their fight for dignity and freedom.<sup>28</sup>

The woman in the photograph likely entered unfamiliar territory when she joined the sit-in in downtown Albany. Like all the white women who joined in the protest for civil rights, she broke social taboos about appropriate female work and conduct. Black women, however, were in a different position. In

27. White, interview.

28. Mary Sterner Lawson, "Freedom is a Constant Struggle: The Albany Movement Reconsidered," paper presented to the Southeast Women's Studies Association Conference, Mar. 14–16, 2002.

black communities, women's activism was common and even expected: even mainstream popular sources such as *Ebony* suggested that black women's social position made them particularly amenable to activism. A history of disfranchisement and oppression meant that African Americans across the centuries were unable to rely on standard avenues of political power for their voice in public affairs; they had to seek alternative means of empowering themselves and their communities, and this search generated unique leadership opportunities for black women.<sup>29</sup>

In the southwest Georgia movement, black women's activism took many different forms and was often woven into the regular activities of day-to-day life. Janie Culbreth Rambeau, who began working with SNCC while she was a student at Albany State College, stresses that there were many women in southwest Georgia "who didn't actually march and go to jail, per se, but who made contributions that you would not believe." Katie B. Harris, for example, whose children include Rutha Harris, one of the original SNCC Freedom Singers, her brother, Emory, and sister, McCree, all of whom were extremely active in the movement, opened her home to any movement worker who needed something to eat or a place to sleep. Rambeau says, "People would come in and they would sleep on a pallet on the floor, just to be with Mama Katie B." Women in southwest Georgia made their homes gathering places for the movement, and their rooms were filled with young participants who felt a sense of responsibility toward them and sought security in their homes and under their care.<sup>30</sup>

Yet nurturing other participants posed a challenge to black women that went beyond the work of around-the-clock cooking, cleaning, and tending to ailing bodies and shattered nerves. Black women also struggled to maintain the integrity of their homes, despite constant threats and attacks. The tendency in civil rights historiography to split the world into dichotomous public and domestic spheres—where the domestic sphere is a romanticized hideaway from the pressures of public life—is one of the many ways in which scholars misjudge women's activities and obscure the full scope of southwest

29. See Roi Ottley, "What's Wrong with Negro Women?" *Negro Digest* 9 (Dec. 1950): 73, and Lerone Bennett, "The Negro Woman," *Ebony* 16/17 (Aug. 1960): 40, as cited in Cynthia Griggs Fleming, "Black Women Activists and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee: The Case of Ruby Doris Smith Robinson," *Journal of Women's History* 3 (Winter 1993): 65–81; Patch, interview; Holsaert, interview. See also Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family from Slavery to Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), esp. 268–74, and Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves 1894–1994* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998).

30. Janie Culbreth Rambeau, interview with author, by telephone, Jan. 25, 2001.

Georgia's freedom struggle. Scholars of civil rights tend to do this despite the fact that women's historians have long acknowledged the problems involved in maintaining a strict public/private split in historical analyses, particularly analyses involving African American women, whose lives and experiences could never be accurately divided in this way. Indeed, the notion that historians need to complicate the split between public and private is no longer up for debate among historians of women and gender.<sup>31</sup> With only a few exceptions, civil rights historians have remained remarkably resistant to the insights of women's and gender history, and, until now, those insights have certainly not been brought to bear on any analyses of southwest Georgia.<sup>32</sup>

Many women in the movement, including Carol King, wife of C. B. King, the primary attorney for the Albany Movement, knew that neither their nurturing presence, nor indeed their home itself, could guarantee respite from the movement's demands or shelter from harm. Although Carol King tried to make her home a source of love and comfort, her domestic space was often no less frenetic than the public space of the protest march, and it was often a target of reprisals. She remembers sneaking out of her sister- and brother-in-law's house, away from police and FBI wiretaps, and crawling on her stomach across the backyard so that she and her family members could have whispered discussions about movement strategy. In her house and in the houses of other movement participants, she says, "the walls had ears," and activity was constant. For many participants in southwest Georgia, the home did not provide separation from the civil rights struggle, and it was not a safe haven. Rather, it was a politically charged center of civil rights activity and sometimes even a battle zone.<sup>33</sup>

The battle raged inside and outside of the home, waged in large part by local families whose youngest daughters stood in the frontlines. SNCC worker Jack Chatfield remembers being "intoxicated by the . . . little knots of kids

31. Among many excellent examples of this insight and the way it has been integrated into this field of scholarship are Elsa Barkley Brown, "Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom," in *Jumpin' Jim Crow: Southern Politics from Civil War to Civil Rights*, ed. Glenda Gilmore, Jane Dailey and Bryant Simon (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 29–52; Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); and Stephanie J. Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do: Black Professional Women Workers during the Jim Crow Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

32. In addition to Payne, Nasstrom, and Ransby, an important exception is Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

33. King, interview.



who were mostly girls,” ever-present at mass meetings, on marches, and at voter registration drives. He remembers young men and boys participating as well, but “not in the [same] number” as girls, and not with their persistence and regularity. Chatfield and other SNCC volunteers wrote in their field reports that the most militant participants were elementary and high school girls who carved out their own space in southwest Georgia politics and cemented the bond between themselves and resident families. The daughters of Odessa Mae and James Christian are but one example. Albany police told twelve-year-old LaVette Christian’s mother that the girl was “crazy and should be watched carefully” because she was so defiant of their authority. When a police officer stopped LaVette one afternoon in downtown Albany and asked if she had ventured out to stir up trouble at Sherrod’s request, she replied

No . . . I went downtown because I wanted to get a soda and I want my freedom. He tried to get me to say something about Sherrod and I just got him off [that topic] and started talking about the schools. I said the reason my Daddy can’t read as good as him is that when we go to school, they give us the old books that the white school has already used, all tore up and pages missing. . . . Then he said, if you [don’t] remember one thing about what Sherrod told you, I’ll put you back in [jail]. So I told him I didn’t remember nothing that Sherrod told me, but I KNEW ONE THING, and that one thing is that I want my freedom.

LaVette Christian’s sisters were equally bold. In Albany in 1963, nine-year-old James Zenna Christian and her seven-year-old sister, Deloris, led two hundred adults in song at a mass meeting. As Faith Holsaert reported, “Couldn’t even see Deloris behind the rostrum but you sure could hear her. Ain’t gonna let NOBODY turn ME round.” The Christians and their friends frequently stepped in to lead songs after the Freedom Singers left Albany. Holsaert also documented the run-ins of one fifteen-year-old “ball of fire,” JoAnne Christian, with police chief Laurie Pritchett. Holsaert wrote that Christian stood firm with her hands on her hips, glared at Pritchett, and commanded LaVette to “Sing, Dear, sing!” The young Christian girls staved off Pritchett with a chorus of “We Shall Overcome.”<sup>34</sup>

34. Jack Chatfield, interview with author, by telephone, Mar. 21, 2002; Faith Holsaert report, Mar. 1963, SNCC, A:4:177, reel 6; Faith Holsaert, Sumter County report, Nov. 8, 1962, SNCC, A:4:177, reel 6; Holsaert, interview; Faith Holsaert report, Feb. 1963, SNCC, A:4:177, reel 6; “A Tribute to SNCC on its Fifth Birthday,” p. 12, ca. 1965,

The Gaines girls—Shirley, Patricia, Marion, and Norma—were the daughters of another active movement family. Like their friends the Christians, these girls reflected their parents' emphasis on participation in the movement. But they were also motivated by something more elusive: Chatfield describes a unique "spirit of youth," which sparkled in individual girls and shone in their "collective character . . . when they were together." SNCC workers and local adults encouraged the girls' participation, but the girls also demonstrated an independent drive to be active within their communities. Marion Gaines was only eleven years old when Charles Sherrod stood her on a chair at a mass meeting in Sumter County—as an emblem of the movement's simultaneous strength and vulnerability—and told the audience, "This is Albany." As a child, Gaines led songs at mass meetings, canvassed, and went to jail for the movement as often as she could. In a 1963 SNCC report, Chatfield noted a conversation he had with Gaines the day after a wave of protests began in Albany: "I asked Marion Gaines when she was going to jail. . . . 'Tomorrow,' she said. 'I couldn't go today on account of I had to go to music.'" For Gaines and her older sisters, the movement was as much a part of life as the familiar childhood pastimes of homework and music lessons.<sup>35</sup>

At fifteen years old, Patricia Gaines (later Slade) went to jail over a dozen times, taking turns with her mother and sisters, but always leaving someone out to tend to the youngest siblings and look after the house. Outside of jail, Gaines had to cope with ongoing intimidation and police surveillance. Gaines, her sisters, and the Christians were often targets of white hostility, and their youth did not protect them from violence or intimidation. Detectives followed them throughout the city of Albany; Shirley Gaines and JoAnne Christian each received brutal police beatings; and one SNCC report depicts Jack Chatfield hugging a hysterical Marion Gaines in the backseat of a car as another car carrying a group of whites rammed them from behind. In addition to the constant threat of violence, Gaines suffered from the strain of balancing participation in the movement with her schoolwork. She was among the first students to integrate Albany High School after winning *Gaines v. Dougherty County Board of Education* in 1965, the suit filed in her older sister Shirley's name. As a teenager, Gaines confronted hostile whites as well as black

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SNCC, A:8:282, reel 22. From oldest to youngest, the daughters of James and Odessa Mae Christian are: JoAnne, LaVette Marie (also known as Dear), James Zenna, and Deloris.

35. Chatfield, interview; Holsaert, Sumter County report, Nov. 8, 1962, SNCC, A:4:177, reel 6; Jack Chatfield report, Mar. 1963, SNCC, A:4:78, reel 5.

classmates who were not involved in the movement and ridiculed her as a “movement mama,” hurling the name at Gaines and the other girls who piled into the SNCC cars after school each day to go canvassing and to attend mass meetings. Through it all, Gaines, her sisters, and their friends persisted because, even at their young age, they believed the movement was theirs to shape. They were the “largely female cadre of youngsters” who formed the core of SNCC’s organizing team and spent all of their afternoons, summers, and school vacations canvassing and protesting segregation.<sup>36</sup>

These self-proclaimed “foot soldiers” did the work for the movement that, according to Gaines, “a lot of people did not want to do.” It is still unclear why these “foot soldiers” were more often girls than boys, just as it is unclear why adult women participated in the movement in greater numbers than men. There are strong correlations between women’s deeper religious faith and their commitment to the movement and between many women’s position as mothers and their tendency to “mother” other activists, two of the explanations most frequently cited by scholars and the women themselves for women’s participation. But correlation must not be mistaken for cause. Payne, who attends closely to this question in *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, contends, “We know beyond dispute that women were frequently the dominant force in the movement.” Male leaders recognized that women had “a deeper sense of something-or-other than men” that seemed to predispose them to activism. But, Payne admits, “We still don’t know very clearly what that something-or-other is.”<sup>37</sup> We are no closer to conclusive explanations when it comes to girls. But perhaps this lack of clarity reflects a problematic analytical stance: perhaps the question should not be, “Why were women and girls so dominant?” as though women’s political participation were itself remarkable, but instead, “What kind of a movement did women and girls create?”

Assessing causality may be difficult, but it is utterly clear that women, and especially girls and young women, occupied a unique and prominent position in the movement. Girls did the movement’s “legwork,” and they were also valuable links between SNCC workers—most of whom were them-

36. Patricia Gaines Slade, interview with author, by telephone, Jan. 22, 2001; Faith Holsaert report, Dec. 1962, SNCC, A:4:177, reel 6; Southwest Georgia Project: Report and Proposals, Dec. 27, 1963, SNCC, A:4:341, reel 9; Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 135; Jack Chatfield report, Apr. 1963, SNCC, A:4:78, reel 5; Chalfen, “The Way Out,” 588, 576.

37. Slade, interview; “something-or-other” comes from E. Frederick Morrow of the NAACP, quoted in Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 276–77.

selves very young and away from home for the first time—and adults in the community who provided them with food, shelter, and surrogate families. Local girls bonded with each other and with the SNCC volunteers in a close-knit group dedicated to making a change in the community. The camaraderie of the movement thus strengthened their commitment to the struggle. As Gaines put it, “Kids would tease [me] but [I could] still hold [my] head up. I knew that I was somebody. . . . I couldn't see why they were not out doing what I was doing.”<sup>38</sup>

Patricia Gaines Slade's sense of group and personal power in the movement also stemmed from her experiences in jail. Albany's mass jail-ins of 1961 and 1962 are well documented in major histories of the movement. They made an impact in the 1960s and mark current historiography because they were the first time in the civil rights struggle—and perhaps in American history—that thousands of people went to jail at once in a collective act of civil disobedience. The jail-ins were a wake-up call to the nation as a whole and to local governing officials in Albany that African Americans would go to unforeseen lengths to overturn Jim Crow; their significance to observers of the movement is thus undeniable. What has been less well documented is the significance of the jail-ins for the people on the inside. If a primary location of the southwest Georgia movement was the domestic space of politicized African American families, during the movement of the 1960s, participants also created other sites of insurgency, most notably in jail cells in Albany and the rural counties, places that, like African American homes, were at once both public *and* private.

Early in the movement SNCC workers in southwest Georgia encouraged local students to challenge Jim Crow by going to “jail without bail.” While the NAACP—the most active civil rights organization in Albany prior to SNCC's arrival—might send people as test cases to be arrested for breaking segregation ordinances, it did not see the benefit in keeping those people in jail. The key point for the NAACP was the legal challenge. When three members of the NAACP Youth Council tested the ICC ruling on November 1, 1961, for example, the NAACP paid their bonds. SNCC, however, considered legal challenges to be of limited value when black people were still too frightened to look whites straight in the eye. With Sherrod and Reagon's encouragement, Bertha Gober and Blanton Hall were the first students to refuse bond; they spent Thanksgiving weekend of 1961 in the Albany city jail. By initiating the jail-ins, Gober and Hall gave individuals in southwest

38. Slade, interview.

Georgia a powerful means of protesting racism and developed a common focus around which the mass movement would coalesce. When residents went to jail en masse in December they began to create a new space for African American protest in the southern United States and demonstrate to whites that an old scare tactic—the threat of punishment through incarceration—would not prevent them from fighting for freedom.

The protesters' resolve, however, could only partially alleviate their fear of hostile white police officers and prison guards. Although the national press never picked up the story of police brutality in Albany and the surrounding counties, participants remember seeing their friends assaulted in jail and while being arrested, and every one of them felt vulnerable. Escaping a beating was a matter of luck, and each attack spoke volumes to the protesters about how far officials were willing to go to prevent African Americans from realizing their goals. Police beat protesters not just to punish and subdue individuals, but also to warn the masses not to get out of hand. In 1961, prison guards in Camilla, Georgia, slapped sixteen-year-old Annie Sue Herring Whitney and told her that the slap was "just a sample of what you're going to get." In the summer of 1963, Veronise Christian watched police beat and arrest John Perdew, a new SNCC recruit in Albany: "I was scared to death, because I thought if they were going to beat a white man like that, you know they're going to kill me. As a matter of fact, that's what the police told me, they said, 'Nigger, you next.'"<sup>39</sup>

But if participants were understandably frightened by the violence they experienced, they proved difficult to scare off. Even early on in the movement, some residents of southwest Georgia had the sense that participation was their destiny: they were called by God to "witness for freedom." After a mass march in December 1961, Rambeau recalls being corralled in what participants called Freedom Alley—a gravel passageway between the jail and the police station in downtown Albany—and watching police drag a teenaged girl up the steps into jail: "I remember the blood running down her face. . . . And I said, I don't know what's going on, so Lord, just take care of us, because there's no turning back at this point—it's forward or die. And at that point I resolved that if it meant dying, I was willing to die for what I was feeling." As Rambeau joined a crowd of black Albanians singing "We Shall

39. Slade, interview; Annie Sue Herring Whitney sworn statement, Dec. 1961, SNCC, A:15:30, reel 37; Christian, in *The Discussion Continues: The Civil Rights Movement in Southwest Georgia*, videotaped discussion, Apr. 21, 1994 (Albany Museum).

Overcome" outside the courthouse and waited to be booked, she felt something "move way down deep on the inside." As she puts it, after years of sensing injustice and resisting alone as best she could, she was "called up" into the movement.<sup>40</sup>

Religious faith motivated people like Rambeau and nourished their struggle. Albanian Mattie L. Williams declares, "Everybody was praying then. . . . The movement will never die because God is not dead, and He was in it." Many participants felt an intense spiritual connection to the movement, and going to jail in defiance of Jim Crow was a measure of their faith. In overcrowded, hot, unsanitary cells, either hungry or sick from eating spoiled food, participants clearly saw the ties between their religious convictions and their dedication to the mass struggle. At nineteen years old, Bernice Johnson testified after leaving jail in Albany for the first time, "I feel closer to God than at any other time in my life, I am none the worse for wear, and I would be willing to go through the whole thing again if necessary." Albanian Willie Mae Thomas remembers the contradictory sense of hating jail yet feeling compelled by religious belief and personal connections to remain there. She says that when she and her friends stayed in jail together, "We prayed. We suffered. We had fun."<sup>41</sup> Suffering together in jail united the group and provided individuals with a sense of personal and moral fulfillment. Jail-ins often became pray-ins that provided opportunities for individuals to get to know one another and to engage in a conscious effort to combat the fragmentation of the group.

The police undoubtedly recognized the ways in which the jail-ins united the movement community. During the mass jail-ins of 1961, officials tried to splinter the movement by transferring protesters from the jail in Albany to remote facilities in the counties. Albany police claimed that the transfers were pragmatic: the city jail was simply too small to hold all of the protesters. While the transfers may indeed have been motivated by utility, police actions suggest that the transfers were also a shrewd effort to divide the community and thus attack the movement at its core. When family members inquired at

40. Janie Culbreth Rambeau, interview with Angela Whitmal, Albany, Georgia, July 6, 1998, transcript (Albany Museum); Rambeau, interview with author.

41. Mattie L. Williams, in *The Discussion Continues*, Apr. 21, 1994; sworn statements regarding conditions in prison, Dec. 1961, SNCC, A:15:30, reel 37; excerpts from statements of Americus Negro students jailed during protest demonstrations there, Aug.–Sept. 1963, SNCC, A:8:103, reel 19; Bernice Johnson sworn statement, Dec. 13, 1961, SNCC, A:15:30, reel 37; Willie Mae Thomas, in *The Discussion Continues: The Civil Rights Movement in Southwest Georgia*, videotaped discussion, Mar. 21, 1994 (Albany Museum).

the Albany jail as to the whereabouts of their spouses and children, guards refused to tell them where they were. On December 12, 1961, Browning wrote,

The people who were housed in such inhumane conditions [in the Albany jail] have been separated and placed in jails in the county and in two surrounding counties. These persons in jail are now going simply on the faith that we and others are still fighting. They are allowed no communication. Mr. [Slater] King's wife [Marion] is in somewhere; he has yet to be allowed to see her.

Carol and C. B. King made every effort to reunite family members: one of Mrs. King's most important jobs during the movement was to stay home and answer phone calls from people trying to locate family members who had been transferred out of the city jail. But as much as the transfers and separations were a struggle for both the prisoners and their families, they also proved to be a blessing in disguise. In need of comfort and support, protesters redefined the isolation of the jail cells. The cells became a place where people "could get an audience" in order to "sit out and discuss issues." As protesters shared information and experiences, they fortified themselves and strengthened the movement.<sup>42</sup>

In this sense, the mass movement formed in the jails of southwest Georgia, and the jail-ins came to symbolize the familial unity that was a key component of freedom. As one elderly woman put it, "My daughter-in-law's in jail, and my grandson's in jail. Hallelujah, we're going to be free." Going to "jail without bail" became a mass phenomenon in southwest Georgia because individuals shared the responsibility of protesting and made it possible for people to give their time to the movement. Some married couples, for example, agreed that wives would go to jail while husbands remained on the outside to work for wages and care for the children. Monroe Gaines, the father of the very active Gaines girls, worked at the Marine base in Albany. He refrained from participating in direct-action protests in order to protect his job, but he took his children to mass meetings every Monday night and encouraged them and his wife, Lorenza, to participate as fully as possible. Lorenza Gaines went to jail for three weeks in 1961; the day she was incarcerated, she took her two-year-old daughter, Norma, with her. Patricia Gaines Slade remembers trying to stay out of jail to make up for her mother's ab-

42. White, interview; Rambeau, interview with author; letter, Dec. 13, 1961, Browning papers; King, interview; Rev. H.C. Boyd, in *The Discussion Continues*, Mar. 21, 1994.

sence and to help look after her younger sisters after prison officials released Norma into their father's custody. Staying out of jail was a struggle—Penny Patch writes that families such as the Gaineses sometimes had to draw lots to decide who would go to jail on a given day—but it was important for Gaines to support her mother's turn in prison as well as to help maintain her family's life at home.<sup>43</sup>

Other participants were inspired to join the jail-ins by mothers and grandmothers who volunteered their time for these and other protests. Veronise Christian says of her mother, Cora Jinks, when “mama went to jail—time out! It's time we go to jail.” If Christian's mother and her grandmother, Annie “Mama Dolly” Raines, were willing to put their faith in the movement and sacrifice for the struggle, then so was she. In part, black residents of southwest Georgia recognized the simple importance of numbers: the more people protesting, the better. But more centrally, they knew that when whole families participated it sent a message to segregationists that threats and hostility notwithstanding, families were together. Men supported their children's and wives' decisions to go to jail even though mere support could get them fired from their jobs. For their part, women and children tried to protect the men when they went to jail: in some cases, they used false names so that officials could not trace them back to their husbands or fathers.<sup>44</sup> Families did what they could to minimize the harm that participation might bring and cooperated to make each member's participation possible; going to jail for the movement came to define their relationships and shape the way they lived their lives.

Perhaps most important, people without formal kinship ties became attached to one another in jail. At least temporarily, the jail environment seemed to erase the social labels of class, age, and gender that usually set people apart. Norma Anderson, the wife of the president of the Albany Movement, remembers sharing a mayonnaise jar of “not quite cold water” with black women of all classes in jail during the movement. A middle-class doctor's wife, she remarked, “I have never been to a church service or communion that moved me more deeply than the experience in that jail cell.” Annette Jones White recounts how young women would give their coats

43. *Southern Patriot* article, October 1962, SNCC, A:4:339, reel 9; Holsaert, interview; Slade, interview; Patch, in Curry, et al., *Deep in Our Hearts*, 149.

44. Christian, in *The Discussion Continues*, Apr. 21, 1994; McCree Harris, in *The Discussion Continues*, Mar. 21, 1994; Joan Browning, interview with author, Albany, GA, October 27, 2000; Special Report on Americus, p. 4, no date, SNCC, A:7:4, reel 13.



and mattresses to the elderly women with whom they shared cells. Rambeau recalls that Corinne Watkins, an older woman, admonished the young women in jail to eat, no matter how bad the food was. And Johnnie Jinks Campbell remembers that when she was in jail, male protesters in the cell knew to turn their heads when the women held hands and encircled an individual who desired some privacy as she used the unenclosed toilet. Small gestures—such as women showing one another how to pad their bras with toothbrushes, candy, and other personal items or teaching one another how to play the card games that were forbidden in their strict Christian homes—led to strong friendships between protesters in jail, whether rich or poor, old or young, educated or unlettered. Even the racially segregated jail cells did not keep black and white civil rights activists from caring for one another and trying to lift one another's spirits. In December 1961, Browning kept up correspondence with Lenora Taitt and Norma Collins, two African American women imprisoned in nearby cells, as well as black and white male volunteers, on scraps of paper towel and toilet paper carried back and forth by a secret messenger.<sup>45</sup>

Away from their homes, uncomfortable, and out of the public eye but under the constant surveillance of hostile guards, jailed protesters cooperated to sustain each other in a harsh environment and maintain the sense of purpose that had driven them to join the jail-ins in the first place. Sherrod states that when people went to jail on civil rights demonstrations, "Right away we recognize[d] each other. People like yourself, getting out of the past. . . . You learn truth in prison, you learn wholeness. You find out the difference between being dead and alive." When they went to jail, members of the community became morally and practically obligated to help one another, creating an expanded movement family. Mary Jones explains, "We were very closely knitted. I had friends who . . . saw about my children when I went to jail . . . and the rest of the family. . . . The Albany movement did that."<sup>46</sup>

The women and girls who went to jail and who organized the range of protests that constituted the movement participated in a struggle that was

45. Anderson, quoted in Vincent Harding, "Community as a Liberating Theme in Civil Rights History," in *New Directions in Civil Rights Studies*, ed. Armstead L. Robinson and Patricia Sullivan (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1991), 22; White, interview; Rambeau, interview with author; Johnnie Jinks Campbell, interview with Angela Whitmal, Albany, GA, Dec. 15, 1997, transcript (Albany Museum); Slade, interview; Rambeau, interview with author; letters from Dougherty County jail, Dec. 1961, Browning papers.

46. Sherrod, quoted in Carson, *In Struggle*, 33; Mary Jones, interview with Angela Whitmal, Albany, GA, Aug. 21, 1998, transcript (Albany Museum).

both satisfying and uncertain. Participants would confront many obstacles, but in the early 1960s, as they fed off one another's energy in cells, at meetings, and in family living rooms, the movement offered seemingly limitless possibilities for change. Some changes were instantaneous: they happened the moment a canvasser convinced someone to register to vote or the second a black student walked in the door of what had been an all-white school. Some of the movement's most concrete goals—legal desegregation of public facilities, for example—were realized well before the decade's end. Other changes took more time to develop. As Kay Smith and Gloria Ward's story shows, it was thirty-five years before one white woman could recognize her part in maintaining Jim Crow, and before a black woman could muster the strength to look her in the eye, refuse her apology, and yet forgive her all the same. Participants in the movement in southwest Georgia did not know when change would come or what form it would take. The history of their struggle is not a straightforward tale of progress; it is one of a group of people who, in spite of ongoing challenges and often murky prospects, kept fighting.

Maintaining the fight was not easy. By the end of 1963, participants were exhausted from repeated confrontations with expert segregationists; the movement was stripped of resources by a hostile federal government; and increasing numbers of SNCC workers were being lured away from the movement by the promise of new challenges in Mississippi. But even as the mass protests lost steam and the national organizations gave the local movement up for dead, some participants, including many of the women introduced here, explored other arenas for their activism and fought in new ways to resolve their most pressing concerns.

Many women altered their activist strategies and seized new opportunities for political participation and self-definition. Janie Culbreth Rambeau stood up against intense sexism and became the first black woman in Albany to be ordained as a Baptist minister. She now runs her own ministry, the House of Refuge. In the years before the mass movement in Albany, Carol King organized a group to help clothe and feed children in an impoverished section of the city and worked as an early childhood educator, maintaining a day nursery started by her mother-in-law, Margaret King, which provided childcare so that parents could work and older siblings attend school. In 1965, after the mass struggle had quieted down, she initiated the Harambee Child Development Council in Albany with a Head Start grant of \$15,475. Harambee would organize a nursery school and help black women pursue college degrees and teacher training. When King left the organization in 1997, it reached over six hundred children each year, employed a staff of ninety-one,

and had an annual budget totaling \$3.6 million. Shirley Sherrod, who grew up in Baker County as Shirley Miller, joined SNCC in 1965 at the age of seventeen after a white man murdered her father. In the four decades since then, she has been a welfare rights activist and participated in a range of community projects. She is now the Georgia director of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, an organization formed in the 1970s by civil rights movement participants to aid African American farmers.<sup>47</sup> It is difficult to say whether these and other women adapted their strategies because the formal campaigns of the civil rights movement ended or whether the campaigns ended because women turned their activist energies elsewhere. Either way, in the years after the formal campaigns, these and other women who became activists in southwest Georgia in the early 1960s did not simply continue an African American tradition of struggle, they reinvented it.

Historian Eric Hobsbawm's terminology is useful in resolving the dilemma of attributing African American activism to tradition. Hobsbawm coined the phrase *invented tradition* to connote, "a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past."<sup>48</sup> Hobsbawm sees invented traditions as hegemonic, created by authorities to assert their dominance. But this does not have to be the case. The important point is not so much whether tradition is top-down or bottom-up, but that it is ironic: it is the repeated reiteration of connections between presents and pasts in beliefs and actions that *seem* to be unchanging but survive because they are fundamentally adaptive.

Previous scholars of the civil rights movement have not given adequate attention to the agency of activists in the 1950s and 1960s in defining the tradition of insurgency to which many activists often attribute their fight. In the course of trying to establish the deep roots of the twentieth-century struggle—an important task that counters the equally problematic notion that before the 1960s African Americans passively accepted their subordinate status—some scholars have actually obscured its historical specificity. Rather than trace the evolution of a particular political culture, scholars have settled for the nebulous assertion that the civil rights movement was merely a stage in a preexisting activist tradition. They may suggest that people "took

47. Rambeau, interview; King, interview; "Albany, Georgia, Nursery School (A Pilot Program for Southern Nursery Schools)," ca. 1965, SNCC, A:15:34, reel 37.

48. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1.

up" or "built on" tradition, but not that they actually created it.<sup>49</sup> Yet it is possible that people developed their sense of what the black activist tradition was, and did things in the name of carrying on that tradition, not because the tradition was overpoweringly strong but because they could make it work in service of the context in which they lived.

They may not have expressed this notion in such forthright terms. Many activists seem to struggle to understand their role in the creation of an African American insurgent legacy, in part because of its success: traditions seem to work best when the real source of their power—the people and groups who are the agents of history—is masked. The historian Bernice Johnson Reagon, who grew up in southwest Georgia and participated in the movement in the 1950s and 60s, wrestles with this dilemma in her 1982 poem, "My Black Mothers and Sisters or On Beginning a Cultural Autobiography." She suggests that enslaved women came to the United States from Africa "with a tradition" of struggle, as though struggle were an innate characteristic—borne in the bodies of women who would become slaves, and inherited, like genes, by successive generations—rather than a chosen response to specific circumstances. But in spite of this romanticization of earlier generations of black women, when she writes about the civil rights era, Reagon begins to capture the dialectical relationship between past and present that fueled the movement and encouraged women like her to participate:

The Civil Rights Movement was simply a continuance  
Or *more complexly* a continuance . . .  
What Black women did in the Civil Rights Movement was to continue  
looking  
at what else we had to do in order for there to be another day for our people.

Here Reagon ties herself to the past, but she also notes that her task was not simply to follow or mimic her foremothers, but to develop new tactics and initiate new battles in a war that they had begun.<sup>50</sup>

Reagon and other participants in the civil rights struggle in southwest Georgia connected themselves to an activist past, which they learned about through relationships with older women in their families and communities and through local lore. The past sustained them because they often saw their connection to it as seamless and natural. But in order to create this image

49. For example, Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*.

50. Bernice Johnson Reagon, "My Black Mothers and Sisters or on Beginning a Cultural Autobiography," *Feminist Studies* 8 (Spring 1982), esp. 93–95.

they also constantly adapted it in both meaning and form to the needs of their present. When they speak of legacies or traditions of protest, they may be speaking as much about their own impulse to adapt the past and ability to take action in the present as about the initiative of their foremothers and fathers. It is this process of adaptation and reformulation of history that calls for further attention and investigation.<sup>51</sup>

Furthermore, it is necessary to examine the process by which both African American and white women became involved in the struggle and what struggle and political activity meant to different women at different times. By continuing to study the civil rights movement of the 1960s as one important stage in women's struggle in southwest Georgia, we will be able to link stories such as the ones introduced here to the more familiar narrative of the movement so that we may see where they overlap as well as where they diverge. Rather than trade Martin Luther King's story for Bernice Johnson Reagon's or the NAACP's for SNCC's, scholars must reconcile the ubiquitous account of southwest Georgia's sudden awakening and dramatic decline—an account that does reflect a certain reality about a movement characterized by ebbs and flows of mass activity—with the counternarrative of a persisting, enduring struggle for change.<sup>52</sup>

The women of southwest Georgia have a history of their own that, for a time, intersected with and imprinted itself on the greatest mass freedom struggle of the twentieth century. Understanding their political traditions and their intellectual landscape will change our notions of power and insurgency. It will also produce a new narrative—grounded in different assumptions about agency, politics, and historical change—of the successes and the failures of African American struggle and the civil rights movement in southwest Georgia and beyond.

51. For a helpful application and critique of Hobsbawm's notions see Norman Knowles, *Inventing the Loyalists: The Ontario Loyalist Tradition and the Creation of Usable Pasts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), esp. 5–10 and 164.

52. My thoughts in this and the preceding paragraph stem from my reading of Nasstrom, "Down to Now."

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## Index

- Abraham Lincoln School, 227  
Adelphi Club, 182  
African American: colleges, 213; disfranchisement, 179; industrial education, 205, 210; migration, 5, 153, 155, 157–58, 179, 189, 191; refugees during Civil War, 87. *See also* Slaves  
African American women: in civil rights movement, 229–58; labor unions, 1–2; in politics, 5, 174–203; reformers, 4, 120, 130–31, 138–47, 150–51, 153–54, 164–73; work and employment, 155–56, 183. *See also* Slaves  
Agricultural, Mechanical and Normal College, 208, 209, 218, 228  
Aked, Charles F., 104, 106  
Alabama, 109, 114, 221, 223–28, 230, 232, 237  
Albany, Georgia, 6, 229, 232–33, 235–41, 243–47, 249–55  
*Albany Herald*, 237, 239  
Albany High School, 247  
Albany Movement, 238, 239, 245, 253–54  
Albany State College, 235, 237, 239, 244  
Albany State University, 243  
Albermarle County, Virginia, 27  
Alden, Esther, 88  
Alexander County, North Carolina, 84  
American Colonization Society, 36  
American Interracial Seminar, 221  
American Public Health Association, 192  
American Revolution, 8, 11; effect on women, 13–14, 19, 29  
Anderson, Norma, 253  
Anderson, William, 238  
*Anglo-American Times*, 110  
Antilynching, 97–119; campaign covered by newspapers, 108–10; campaign refuted, 112–16; laws, 111–13; movement, 97, 99, 103, 107, 119; organization, 102–3; refuting rape as reason, 105, 111; relation to white supremacy, 105–6. *See also* Lynching  
Arkansas, 6, 109, 205, 209–12, 216–20, 228  
Arkansas Industrial University, 208  
Armstrong, Richard A., 115  
Armstrong, Samuel Chapman, 213  
Army training camps, 156–67, 164–65, 167–71  
Atlanta, Georgia, 5, 152–73, 227, 238; constitution of, 162; race riot of 1906, 155, 171–72  
*Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 229  
Atlanta University, 166, 169  
Augusta County, Virginia, 16, 18  
Bailey, Emma, 130  
Baker County, Georgia, 256  
Baltimore, Maryland, 117, 128



- Banner, The*, 116  
 Bardaglio, Peter, 51  
 Barrett, Harris, 139  
 Barrett, Janie Porter, 123, 132, 138, 141, 145, 149–51  
 Barrows, Samuel J., 115  
 Barry, Emma, 239  
 Bass, Charlotte, 227  
 Bedacht, Max, 226  
 Beeman, Richard, 27–28  
 Berkeley, 217  
 Bernard Skin and Cancer Hospital, 182  
 Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, 212  
 Birmingham, Alabama, 221, 223, 226–27, 230  
 Black, Naomi, 176  
*Black and White*, 222–23, 228  
 Blackburn, Richard Scott, 31  
 Blackburn, Thomas, 31  
*Blacker the Berry, The*, 220–21  
 Blaine, James G., 100  
 Blair, William, 83  
 Bland, Frances Bolling, 8–9  
 Bland, Theodorick, 9–10  
 Board of Charities and Corrections, 129–30, 135, 140  
 Board of the Charity Commissioners of St. Louis, 182  
 Booker T. Washington Vocational Training School, 199  
 Booklovers Club, 181, 183  
 Boston, Massachusetts, 115–16  
 Bowie, Walter, 123, 125, 134, 149  
 Bowles, Benjamin F., 183  
 Bowles, Carrie K., 177, 181, 183, 185–86  
*Bradford Observer*, 108  
 Bramlett, Martin, 65  
 Branch, Thomas, 134  
 Breckinridge, J. Cabell, 63  
 Breedlove, Mrs. J. T., 181  
 Breen, Timothy H., 12  
 Briley, Harriet S., 84  
 Britain, 4, 8, 83, 97–119, 227; U.S. trade with, 10–13, 19  
 British Society of Friends, 119  
 British Women's Temperance Association, 104  
 Brooks, Clayton McClure, 4, 120–51, 259  
 Brown, Charles, 76  
 Brown, Elsa Barkley, 121, 177  
 Browne, Martha Griffith, 58–59  
 Browning, Joan, 230–31, 238, 241, 252, 254  
*Brown v. Board of Education*, 202, 203, 237  
 Bryn Mawr College, 182  
 Burrell, Mary, 137  
 Burwell, Mary, 123  
 Bus boycott: in Albany, Georgia, 239; in Montgomery, Alabama, 237  
 Bush, Margaret, 201  
 Bushman, Richard, 10  
 Bynum, Victoria, 82  
 California, 207  
 Camilla, Georgia, 250  
 Camp Gordon, 164–65, 167, 169–70  
 Campbell, Alice, 92  
 Campbell, Jacqueline Glass, 3–4, 74–96, 259  
 Campbell, Johnnie Jinks, 254  
 Candler, Asa, 158  
 Carr Lane School, 196  
 Carson, Clayborne, 231  
 Carter, John, 212  
 Carter, Robert “King,” 11  
 Catlett, Thomas B., 68  
 Catt, Carrie Chapman, 178, 182  
 Central of Georgia Railway, 238  
 Chafe, William H., 175  
 Charlotte, North Carolina, 86  
 Charlotte County, Virginia, 16  
 Chatfield, Jack, 231, 245, 247  
 Chatham County, North Carolina, 81  
 Chesterfield, Virginia, 8  
 Chicago, Illinois, 205, 227  
 Childress, Alice, 227  
 Christian, Deloris, 246  
 Christian, James Zenna, La Vette, and Odessa Mae, 246  
 Christian, JoAnne, 246–47  
 Christian, Veronise, 250  
 Christian, Virginia, 145  
*Christian Register*, 115–17  
*Christian World*, 104  
 Churches Home for Girls, 156  
 Citizen's Liberty League, 180  
 Citizens' Supervisory Bond Issue Committee, 191  
 City Hospital No. 1, 190, 192

- City Hospital No. 2, 191–92  
 Civil rights movement, 6, 97, 121, 147, 189, 201, 229–58  
 Civil Rights Congress, 227  
 Civil War, 3, 74–96  
 Clark, Adele, 123  
 Clark, John T., 194, 198  
 Clubwomen, 5, 152–54, 158–73  
 Coalter, Fanny, 16, 18, 22, 26–27, 29  
 Coalter, John, 7, 16, 18–19, 22  
 Coalter, Margaret Davenport, 7  
 Cochran, Reuben, 62  
 Cocke, Ann Barraud, 24  
 Cocke, Elizabeth, 123, 129, 133, 135–37  
 Coles, Elizabeth, 27  
 College Club, 183  
 Collier, Elizabeth, 94  
 Collins, Norma, 238, 254  
 Colored Committee (of League of Women Voters), 5, 181, 183, 184, 186–88, 193  
 Colored War Work Council, 164, 166, 171  
 Colored Women's Clubs, 181, 188  
 Colored Women's College Club, 188  
 Columbia, South Carolina, 88  
 Commission on Interracial Cooperation, 146, 148  
 Commission on Training Camp Activities, 157, 159, 165  
 Committee on Women's Defense Work, 159, 163, 167, 172  
 Communism, 205, 219, 221, 224  
 Community House for Negro People, 136  
 Confederate women, 74–96  
 Congregational Education Society, 221, 224  
*Contemporary Review*, 104  
 Cook, Fannie, 191, 194, 199  
 Cottage Grove School, 195  
 Cox, Rebeca, 55–56  
 Cox, Rutha A., 55  
 Cox, William, 55–56  
 Crisis, 219, 227  
 Cumberland County, Virginia, 18  
 Cunliff, Nelson, 191  
 Cunningham, Ann Pamela, 47  
 Curtis, Julia Childs, 181  
 Curtis, W. P., 190  
 Custis, Daniel Parke, 13  
 Dammond, Peggy, 240  
*Das Kapital*, 216–18, 221  
 Davenport, Frances, 27  
 Davidson County, North Carolina, 81  
 Davis, Adrienne, 58–59  
 Davis, Jackson, 123  
 Deckard, Barbara S., 175  
 Delta Pride, 1  
 Denning, Michael, 225  
 Denton, John, 66  
 Department of Public Welfare, 129, 192  
 Deserters, 78–81, 85  
 Dickman, Bernard, 183  
 Dickson, Amanda, 68  
 Dickson, David, 68  
 Dorris, John, 66  
 Douglas, Aaron, 220  
 Douglas, Alta, 220  
 Douglass, Frederick, 57, 97  
 Dowden-White, Priscilla A., 5, 174–203, 259  
 Du Bois, W. E. B., 97, 207, 215–17, 219  
 Duke of Argyll, 199  
 Dunham, George W., 113  
 Dunn, Fannie, 87  
 East St. Louis, Illinois, 183  
*Ebony*, 244  
*Economist*, 104, 119  
 Edgewood Community Center, 166, 168, 170  
 Edmondston, Catherine, 93, 94  
 Edwards, Laura, 82  
 Eighth District Federated Clubs, 186  
*Elbert County Star*, 113  
 Equal Rights Amendment, 175  
 Equal Suffrage League of Virginia, 133  
 Escott, Paul, 82  
 Ethical Society of St. Louis, 182  
 Farwell, S. S., 76  
 Faust, Drew, 74  
 Fayetteville, North Carolina, 92–93  
 Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, 132, 139, 140, 182, 188, 189  
 Federation of Southern Cooperatives, 256  
 Female reformatories, 131  
 Ferrenbach, Edward A., 196  
 Finley, Robert, 76  
 Fischel, Martha Ellis, 182

- Fischel, Washington, 182  
 Fishback, William Meade, 109  
 Fisher, Aaron, 201  
 Fisk University, 215  
 Food riots, 82–83  
 Ford, James, 220, 222  
 Forman, James, 238  
 Franklin Neighborhood Association, 196, 198  
 Franklin School, 196–99  
 Fredericksburg, Virginia, 21  
 Freedmen's Aid Association, 103  
 Freedom Riders, 238, 241  
 Freedom Singers, 233, 244, 246  
 Freeman, Douglas Southall, 135  
 Frystak, Shannon L., 202  
 Fulton Bag and Cotton Mill Village, 155  
 Funsten Nut Company Strike, 183
- Gaines, Lorenza, 252  
 Gaines, Marion, 247  
 Gaines, Monroe, 252  
 Gaines, Norma, 247, 252  
 Gaines, Patricia, 247, 249, 252  
 Gaines, Shirley, 247–48  
 Gamble, Vanessa, 189  
 Gellhorn, Edna, 182, 185–86  
 Gellhorn, George, 182  
 Georgia, 5, 6, 91, 106, 111–16, 152–73, 227, 229–58  
 Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, 125  
 Gilmore, Glenda, 138  
 Gober, Bertha, 237, 249  
 Gorst, Sir John Eldon, 109  
 Grady, Beatrice, 181–82, 188  
 Graham, Shirley, 227  
 Green, Hector, 65  
 Greensboro, Georgia, 116  
 Greensboro, North Carolina, 82, 237  
 Griscom, Lloyd C., 109
- Hadley Vocational School, 196  
 Hale, Beatrice Forbes-Robertson, 186  
 Hall, Blanton, 237, 249  
 Hall, Prathia, 242  
 Hamilton, Philip, 2, 7–29, 259  
 Hammond, Lily, 139  
 Hampton, Virginia, 6, 139, 142, 216, 218–20
- Hampton Institute, 125, 139, 205, 212–18, 221, 228  
 Harambee Child Development Council, 255  
 Harlem, 205, 239  
 Harlem Renaissance, 6, 204, 220–21  
 Harper, William, 66  
 Harris, Emory, Katie B., McCree, and Rutha, 244  
 Harrison County, Kentucky, 54, 57  
 Harrison, Alisa Y., 6, 229–58, 259  
 Harrison, Mary, 14, 18, 21  
 Harrison, Randolph, 14–15  
 Harrison, Susannah, 21, 26  
 Hatcher, Orie Latham, 123, 131  
 Hawthorn, James, 69  
 Hawthorne, Sally, 92  
 Hayden, Casey, 238  
 Hayden, Tom, 238  
 Henderson County, Kentucky, 65, 68–69  
 Herr, John, 77  
 Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks, 176, 184  
 Hill, Kitty, 88  
 Hinsdale, Elizabeth, 92, 93  
 Historic preservation, 3, 30–49  
 Hobsbawm, Eric, 256  
 Hodes, Martha, 67  
 Holmes, Theophilus, 80  
 Holsaert, Faith, 241–42, 246  
 Home for Working Girls, 131  
*Home Mission Monthly*, 117  
 Home Guard, 80, 81, 85  
 Homer G. Phillips Hospital, 183  
 Hoover, Herbert, 211  
 Horne, Lena, 227  
 Hostess Houses, 165, 167–68, 170  
 Hotel Chase, 187  
 House of Refuge, 255  
 House, John, 67–68  
 Household production, 10  
 Houston, Nora, 123  
 Howard University, 215  
 Howell, Bertha B., 199  
 Huggins, Nathan, 207  
 Hughes, Langston, 204, 220, 221, 224  
 Humanity Club, 182  
 Hunter, Tera, 138  
 Hurston, Zora Neale, 220–21

- Idaho, 207  
 Impey, Catherine, 103, 104, 107, 109  
 Industrialization, 120, 153  
*Infants of the Spring*, 221  
 International Labor Defense Committee, 227  
 International Workers Order, 220, 225, 228  
 Interracial Committee, 199–201  
 Interracial cooperation, 120–51, 174, 182–83, 188, 198–203, 236–37, 241  
 Interracial relationships, 51, 52, 58, 61–68, 70–73, 171  
 Interstate Commerce Commission, 236–38, 249
- Jackson, Giles, 123  
 Jackson Ward, 135  
 Jacobs, Harriet, 58  
 Jacquelyn Dowd Hall Prize, 6nn2,3  
 Jail: source of resistance, 234, 237–38, 247, 249–54  
 James River, 9, 134  
 Jefferson, Thomas, 23  
 Jefferson City, Missouri, 188  
 Jefferson County, Virginia, 32  
 Jim Crow. *See* Segregation  
 Jinks, Cora, 253  
 John Marshall School, 195  
 Johnson, Bernice, 251  
 Johnson, Mary Ann, 27  
 Johnston, Joseph, 78, 94  
 Johnston, Mary, 137  
 Jones, Annette, 239, 243, 253  
 Jones, Annie, 89  
 Jones, Mary, 254  
 Jones, Susie Williams, 181  
 Jones, Thomas Goode, 109  
 Jordan, Clarence and Florence, 236  
 Judson, Sarah Mercer, 5, 152–73, 260  
*Juridicial Review*, 102
- Kansas City, Missouri, 176, 181  
 Kennedy, N. J. D., 102  
 Kentucky, 3, 50–73  
 Kierner, Cynthia, 27  
 King, C. B., 245, 252  
 King, Carol, 245, 252, 255  
 King, Margaret, 255
- King, Marion, 252  
 King, Martin Luther, Jr., 6, 231, 232, 233, 238, 258  
 King, Mary, 231  
 King, Slater, 252  
 Kinship networks, 9–10, 17, 22  
 Koinonia Community Farm, 236  
 Ku Klux Klan, 125, 214
- Landes, Daniel, 69  
 Laursen, Per, 238  
 Lawrence, Kansas, 176  
 Lawson, Mary Sterner, 243  
 League of Women Voters, 5, 132, 174–203  
 Lee, “Light-Horse” Harry Lee, 24–25  
 Lee, Bernard, 238  
 Lee, Elizabeth Collins, 24–25  
 Lee, Jean B., 3, 30–49, 260  
 Lee, Richard Bland, 24–25  
 Lee, Richard Henry, 31  
 Lee, Robert E., 79, 84  
 Lee County, 240  
 Legal rights of women, 53–55, 62  
 Leslie, Kent Anderson, 68  
 Lewis, Eleanor Custis, 34  
 Lewis, John, 21  
 Liberia, 36, 60, 71  
 Liberty Loan, 163  
 Lincoln, Abraham, 217  
 Lincoln High School, 183  
 Lincoln Institute, 188  
 Lincoln University Law School, 202  
 Little Rock, Arkansas, 212  
 Liverpool, England, 115  
 Locust Street Settlement House, 139  
 London Anti-Lynching Committee, 109  
*London Daily Chronicle*, 108, 110, 117, 118  
 Lost Cause ideology, 4, 121, 124, 125, 132, 134, 150  
 Louisiana, 100–101, 227  
 Luna City, 156  
 Lundenburg County, Virginia, 27  
 Lynching: debate on causes, 97; decline in Virginia, 127; denounced by London papers, 105–6, 108, 110–11; during WWI, 170; as “frontier justice,” 100, 102, 119; as impediment to immigration, 112; racially motivated, 97–119; rape as excuse for, 4, 95, 99, 101–2,

- 105, 119, 171; as system of racial oppression, 125, 205, 223; women as victims, 105, 107. *See also* Antilynching
- MacMillan's Magazine*, 100
- Macon News*, 229
- Macon, Georgia, 106
- Marriage: function of, in broadening kinship, 9; relations, 7, 8–9, 10, 14–15, 17–18, 22
- Martin, William, 69
- Marxism, 216–20, 222, 225
- Maryland, 117, 128
- Mason, Charlotte Osgood, 221
- Mason, Lucy Randolph, 133
- Massenburg Bill, 128
- Mastin, Joseph, 123, 130
- Maternalism, 121, 165
- Mayo, Isabella Fyvie, 103, 104, 107, 109
- McCarthy, Justin, 109
- McMasters, Harriet, 80
- McMurry, Linda O., 98
- Memphis, Tennessee, 99, 111
- Meshrabpom Film Corporation, 223, 224
- Metzgar, John, 90
- Mexico, 221
- Migration, Great, 179, 189, 191; to urban areas, 153, 155, 157–58; westward, 8, 13, 15
- Milledgeville, Georgia, 241
- Miller, Isaac, 50, 70
- Miller, Jane, 50, 52, 54, 59–60, 68–69, 71–73
- Minor, Charles, 237
- Minor, Jeremiah, 52, 64–65, 67–72
- Mississippi, 1, 128, 232, 255
- Mississippi Freedom Summer, 240
- Mississippi River: 1927 flood, 210–11, 217
- Missouri, 5, 174–203
- Missouri Equal Suffrage League, 182
- Mitchell, John, Jr., 123, 126–27, 147
- Montgomery County, Georgia, 113
- Montgomery, Alabama, 237
- Moore, George, 62
- More, Nelson, 55
- Morehouse College, 166
- Morrill Act of 1890, 208
- Mother Craft, 188
- Mount Vernon, 3, 11, 30–49
- Mount Vernon Ladies Association, 3, 36, 47, 48
- Mule Bone*, 220
- Munford, Beverley, 133
- Munford, Mary Cooke Branch, 123, 129, 132–34, 137–38, 141, 145–46, 148, 150–51
- NAACP, 146, 180, 202, 235–37, 249, 258
- Nasstrom, Kathryn, 234
- National American Woman Suffrage Association, 5, 175, 178, 182
- National Association of Colored Women, 139, 180
- National Consumer's League, 132–33
- National Municipal League, 133, 136
- National Woman's Party, 176, 178
- Negro Organization Society, 121
- Neighborhood Union, 153, 160, 166, 167, 169, 170
- Nelson, Claire Nee, 6, 204–28, 260
- Nevada, 206
- Nevins, Mrs. T. J., 181
- New Orleans, Louisiana, 100–101, 227
- New York City, 5, 205, 216, 220, 228
- New York Committee to Free Angela Davis, 227
- New York Observer*, 46
- New York School of Social Work, 219–21
- Newcastle Daily Leader*, 108
- Nichols, George, 76
- Nichols, Lila, 88–89
- Norman, Martha Prescod, 231
- North Carolina, 3–4, 74–96, 237
- Northen, William J., 111, 113–15, 117
- Ohio State University, 209
- Oregon, 207
- Origin of the Family*, 222
- Ovington, Mary, 146
- Page, Mann, 11
- Paris, Texas, 102
- Park, Maud Wood, 178
- Parks, Rosa, 239
- Patch, Penny, 240, 241, 253
- Paternalism, 124–29, 133–38, 142–44, 147–51, 213–15, 219, 221, 228
- Paterson, A. H., 100
- Patriotic leagues, 159, 162, 163, 165

- Patterson, Louis Thompson, 6, 204–28  
 Patterson, William L., 216, 227–28  
 Payne, Charles, 234, 248  
 Payne, Lillian, 123  
 Peachtree Arcade, 165, 168  
 Peake's Turnout, Virginia, 141  
 Peck, Fannie, 181  
 Pennington, James C., 57  
 People's Art Center, 183  
 Pepper, George, 76  
 Perdew, John, 250  
 Petitions to Confederate government, 79–81, 83–85  
 Peyton, Elizabeth Scott, 24, 26  
 Pine Bluff, Arkansas, 6, 205, 209–12, 216–20, 228  
 Pitts, Yvonne, 3, 50–73, 260  
 Pittsylvania County, Virginia, 16  
 Playground and Recreation Association of America, 157  
 Pool, Parker, 87  
 Popular Front, 6, 204–28  
 Poro College, 186, 189  
 Powell, John, 147–48  
 Price, Jacob, 10  
 Prime, Samuel I., 46  
 Prince George County, Virginia, 8  
 Prince William County, Virginia, 31  
 Pritchett, Laurie, 246  
 Progressivism, 122–23, 125–26, 158–62, 168, 181, 214  
 Prostitution, 157, 160, 167  
 Provident Association, 182–83  
  
 Quarterman, Ola Mae, 239  
  
 Rabinowitz, Joni, 241  
 Rable, George, 84  
 Racial discrimination, 205–14, 217–18, 221–28, 236–38, 240, 242–44, 255–56. *See also* Segregation; Lynching  
 Raines, Annie "Mama Dolly," 253  
 Raleigh, North Carolina, 85, 90  
 Rambeau, Janie Culbreth, 244, 250, 254–55  
 Randolph, Frances Bland, 8–9, 10, 12, 16  
 Randolph, John, 8–9  
 Randolph, John, Jr., 12, 16, 22, 29  
 Randolph, Judith, 16, 18, 23–24, 28  
 Randolph, Richard, 16, 18  
 Randolph County, North Carolina, 80–81  
 Ransby, Barbara, 234  
 Rape: fear of, in WWI Atlanta, 171  
 Reagon, Bernice Johnson, 257–58  
 Reagon, Cordell, 235, 237, 249  
 Red Cross, 163, 183, 202, 211  
 Redfield, Isaac, 61  
 Richmond, Virginia, 21, 27, 127, 131, 135, 139  
 Richmond Community House for Colored People, 146  
 Richmond Education Association, 132, 133, 135  
 Richmond Neighborhood Association, 131  
*Richmond News Leader*, 135  
*Richmond Planet*, 121, 126  
*Richmond Times Dispatch*, 121  
 Richmond Urban League, 146  
 Roberts, Amanda, 28  
 Robinson, Mrs. C. K., 181  
 Roosevelt, Franklin D., 179, 225  
 Russell Sage Foundation, 140, 157  
  
 Sanity: legal concept of, 50–73  
 Saturday Afternoon Club, 133  
 Savage, Augusta, 222  
 Savannah, Georgia, 113–14  
 Schechter, Patricia, 98  
 Schmelz, Annie, 123  
 Scott, Anne Firor, 174  
 Scott, Emmett J., 194  
 Scott County, Kentucky, 64  
 Scottsboro, Alabama, 114, 224–25, 227–28  
 Scottsboro Action Committee, 225  
 Segregation, 4, 5, 103, 120–32, 134–39, 142–44, 146–51, 153, 156, 159–60, 165–73, 181, 184–86, 189–90, 192–97, 200–203, 208–10, 212–14, 218, 226–28, 232, 236–44, 246, 248–49, 251, 254–55  
 Sellers, Charles, 19  
 Shammass, Carole, 13  
 Sharecroppers, 209, 211, 217, 223  
 Sherman, William T., 3, 77, 81, 85, 87–95  
 Sherrod, Charles, 235, 237, 241–42, 246–47, 249, 254  
 Sherrod, Shirley, 256  
 Silkey, Sarah L., 4, 97–119, 260

- Simms, William, 88  
 Sixth Southern Conference on Women's History, 1  
 Slade, Patricia. *See* Gaines, Patricia  
 Slavery in Civil War North Carolina, 86;  
   as affected by legal cases, 50–73; as  
   sectional political issue, 39  
 Slaves: and American Colonization  
   society, 36; as beneficiaries of wills, 52;  
   bequeathed in wills, 55–56, 62; in  
   Civil War North Carolina, 86–88; of  
   George Washington, 11; inherited by  
   Jane Washington, 34; as links to George  
   Washington, 45–46; as litigants, 56,  
   60, 64–65; manumission of, 3, 50–73;  
   mistresses relationship with, 25–26;  
   rumors of insurrection, 86; sale of,  
   21, 26, 55; spirituals, 214; work, 11,  
   20, 22, 25. *See also* Interracial  
   relationships  
 Smith, Henry, 102  
 Smith, Janie, 91–93  
 Smith, Kay, 229–30, 255  
 Smith, Schuyler, 197  
 Smithville, Georgia, 241  
 Smuts, Jan, 215  
 Society for the Recognition of the Brother-  
   hood of Man, 102–4, 109–10  
 Society of Friends, 102, 104, 119  
 Sojourners for Truth and Justice, 227  
 South Africa, 215  
 South Carolina, 75–77, 87–88, 91  
 Southern Association for Women  
   Historians, 1n1  
 Southern Baptist Convention, 111  
 Soviet Union, 220, 222  
*Spectator*, 101, 104, 106  
 Spencer, Cornelia, 93  
 St. Louis Association of Colored Women's  
   Clubs, 181  
 St. Louis Committee for Social Service  
   among Colored People, 190  
 St. Louis Community Council, 191, 193  
 St. Louis Medical Society, 192  
*St. Louis Star*, 191  
 St. Louis, Missouri, 5, 174–203  
*St. Luke's Herald*, 134  
*State and Revolution*, 222  
 Staunton, Virginia, 7, 16, 27  
 Stevens, Josephine, 181  
 Stokes, Ora B., 123, 131, 149  
 Stowe Teachers' College, 196  
 Straus, Dorothy, 177  
 Stuart, H. C., 131  
 Student Nonviolent Coordinating Com-  
   mittee, 233, 235–38, 240–42, 245,  
   247–50, 255–56, 258  
 Sumner High School, 194–96  
 Sumter County, Georgia, 236, 247  
 Swarthmore, 240  
  
 Tait, Lenora, 238, 254  
 Talbot, Edmund, 51, 64–65, 68–72  
 Terborg-Penn, Rosalyn, 176  
 Terrell County, Georgia, 237, 242  
 Texas, 102, 107  
 Tharpe, W. H., 132  
 Thomas, Willie Mae, 251  
 Thompson, E. P., 83  
 Thompson, Mildred, 98  
 Thurman, Wallace, 204, 220  
 Tobacco: economy and trade, 2, 8, 11–  
   13, 19–20, 23  
 Trigg County, Kentucky, 50, 55–56, 60, 71  
 Truth, Sojourner, 239  
 Tuberculosis and Health Society, 191  
 Tucker, David M., 98  
 Tucker, Frances Randolp, 29  
 Tucker, Nathaniel Beverly, 16, 23  
 Tucker, Polly Coalter, 22–23, 27  
 Tucker, St. George, 16  
 Turner School for Handicapped  
   Children, 188  
 Turner, W. P., 116  
 Tushnet, Mark, 51  
  
 Unions, 1–2, 219  
 United Food and Commercial Workers, 1  
 United Nations, 227  
 United Way, 202  
 University of Arkansas, 208  
 University of California at Berkeley, 207  
 University of Chicago, 208  
 University of Georgia, 237  
 University of Virginia, 213  
 Uplift ideology, 205, 212–19, 228  
 Urban League, 183, 188, 191, 194, 197–  
   200, 219, 221  
 Urbanization, 120, 153  
 Utah, 207

- Valentine, Lila Meade, 133  
*Valley of the Shenandoah*, 16  
 Vance, Zebulon B., 79, 81, 83–85  
 Vanguard, 222  
 Vashon School, 196  
 Vauxhall Island, Virginia, 134  
 Venereal disease, 157  
 Virginia, 2, 4, 6, 7–29, 31, 32, 83, 120–51, 213, 216, 218–20  
 Virginia Board of Charities and Corrections, 121  
 Virginia Bureau of Vocations for Women, 131  
 Virginia Industrial School for Colored Girls, 132, 138–40, 142, 145, 149–50  
 Vonderlehr law, 128  
 Voter registration drives, 234, 236  
 Voters League, 236
- Waldrep, Christopher, 114  
 Walker, Gilbert C., 134  
 Walker, Maggie Lena, 121, 123, 127, 134, 139, 141, 145–46, 149  
 Walker, T. C., 123, 130  
 War Work Councils, 159  
 Ward, Gloria, 229–30, 255  
 Washington, 207  
 Washington, Booker T., 97, 119, 125, 144, 148, 212  
 Washington, Bushrod, 31, 34, 36–38, 44–45  
 Washington, George, 8, 11, 12, 31–32, 37–38, 40, 43–48  
 Washington, Jane C., 3, 30–49  
 Washington, John Augustine, 30, 32, 34–35, 38, 40–44, 47–49  
 Washington, Julia Blackburn, 34  
 Washington, Martha, 11, 12, 34, 38, 44  
 Washington University, 182  
 Watkins, Corinne, 254  
 “We Shall Overcome,” 233, 246, 250–51
- Wednesday Club, 182  
 Wells, Ida B., 4, 97–119, 239  
 West, Dorothy, 221  
 White, Annette. *See* Jones, Annette  
 White, Deborah Gray, 180  
 White, Sarah, 1–2, 6  
 White City, 156  
 White Legion, 226  
 White supremacy, 100–106, 125, 126, 155, 166, 171–72, 214, 219, 223  
 Whitney, Annie Sue Herring, 250  
 Widowhood, 12, 55–56; of Jane Washington, 34–35  
 Wilkerson, Margaret, 206  
 William and Mary College, 213  
 Williams, Mattie L., 251  
 Williamson, Joel, 101  
 Wills: contested, 50–73; executed by women, 12; written by women, 50–54, 60, 68–73  
 Wilson, Margaret Bush, 180, 202  
 Wilson, Woodrow, 170  
 Winchester, Virginia, 16  
 Wirt, Elizabeth Gamble, 15  
 Wirt, William, 15  
 Wolf, A. J., 198  
 Woman suffrage, 121, 133  
 Women’s Club of St. Louis, 182  
 Worker’s International, 223  
 Workers School, 221  
 World War I, 5, 152–73  
 Worth, Josephine, 90  
 Worth, Nellie, 89, 94  
 Wright, Irene Asbury, 237
- YMCA, 156–57, 165–66  
 Yungbans, Karl, 224  
 YWCA, 133, 157, 159, 161, 163–67, 172, 184, 188–89, 197
- Zellner, Robert, 231, 238  
 Zinn, Howard, 231



